

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



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FEATURE COMMENTARY

## Terrorism Challenges for the Trump Administration

BRUCE HOFFMAN

FEATURE ARTICLE

## The French-Belgian Islamic State Attack Network

JEAN-CHARLES BRISARD AND  
KÉVIN JACKSON

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## FROM THE EDITOR

The incoming Trump administration faces serious counterterrorism challenges, which Bruce Hoffman argues in our cover article are as significant as any faced since the period around 9/11 with a strengthening global al-Qa`ida network posing the most serious long-term threat. With Islamic State- and al-Qa`ida-aligned groups present in more countries than ever before, Hoffman argues that a reconciliation at some point between the groups is not impossible, and with a large cohort of foreign fighters trained in Syria and Iraq available to them in the future, he stresses the United States urgently needs to reboot its counterterrorism strategy.

In our other cover article, which we published online ahead of the rest of the issue to mark the one-year anniversary of the Paris terror attacks, Jean-Charles Brisard and Kévin Jackson assess the French-Belgian nexus in the Islamic State's external operations wing responsible for the Paris and Brussels attacks. The article's revelations on how the attack cell infiltrated Europe were featured as the lead front-page story in *Le Monde* and in many other newspapers across Europe.

Brian Glyn Williams and Robert Souza assess the so-called Russian counterterrorism intervention in Syria, arguing it risks both strengthening the Islamic State and unleashing a terrorist blowback on Russian soil, as well as deepening the sectarian tensions across the Middle East that fuel terrorism. With a terrorist attack broadcasted live over the internet seemingly only a matter of time, Jason Burke examines how evolving media technology is increasing the impact of what the Syrian jihadi strategist Abu Musab al-Suri called "individual terrorism," making attacks by lone actors or small autonomous cells an increasingly attractive paradigm for global jihadis facing territorial losses in Syria and Iraq.

Tim Lister, who just returned from Iraq, examines the "uphill struggle" to dislodge the Islamic State from Mosul based on six weeks of reporting on and around the frontlines. With Iraqi forces engaged in the most intense urban warfare seen since Beirut in the 1980s, he argues, the longer fighting lasts, the more likely the coalition put together with considerable mediation from the United States will begin to fray or that a humanitarian catastrophe will disrupt or even overwhelm the offensive.

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## CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center

U.S. Military Academy

607 Cullum Road, Lincoln Hall

West Point, NY 10996

Phone: (845) 938-8495

Email: [sentinel@usma.edu](mailto:sentinel@usma.edu)

Web: [www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/)

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*Cover: Heavy smoke from burning oil wells set on fire by fleeing Islamic State members is seen blanketing homes on November 9, 2016, in Al Qayyarah, south of Mosul, Iraq. (Chris McGrath/Getty Images)*



# The Global Terror Threat and Counterterrorism Challenges Facing the Next Administration

By Bruce Hoffman

**Although the Islamic State poses the most serious, imminent terrorist threat today, al-Qa`ida has been quietly rebuilding and marshaling its resources to reinvigorate the war against the United States declared 20 years ago by its founder and leader, Usama bin Ladin. The result is that both groups have enmeshed the United States and the West in a debilitating war of attrition, with all its deleterious consequences. The Islamic State has built an external operations capability that will likely survive its loss of territory in Libya, Iraq, and Syria. Meanwhile, the threat from al-Qa`ida persists and may become more serious as it attempts to capitalize on the Islamic State's falling star alongside the enhancement of its own terrorist strike capabilities.**

**L**ight up the fire on the flowing crowd, pour grenades on the crusader's head. Don't have mercy until he's broken." This was the encrypted message that a Moroccan-born Islamic State operative in Italy received from his commanders in the Middle East via WhatsApp last April. Although Italian authorities were able to thwart the series of attacks planned for that country,<sup>1</sup> their French, Belgian, and Turkish counterparts were not successful in preventing the succession of Islamic State-inspired or -directed incidents that convulsed Paris in November 2015, Istanbul and Brussels the following March, Istanbul's international airport in June, and Nice last July.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, according to one compilation, the Islamic State to date has carried out nearly 150 attacks in over two dozen countries that, excluding the ongoing carnage in Syria and Iraq, have claimed the lives of more than 2,000 persons.<sup>3</sup> This article assesses the scope and nature of the terrorist threat today, its likely future trajectory, and the counterterrorism strategy needed to counter it.

There was a time not so long ago when the conventional wisdom was that the Islamic State's violence would somehow remain confined to the perennially volatile and sanguinary Levant and Iraq and that the only threat to the West was in the form of random, isolated attacks by "lone wolves" striking independently of any organizational imperative or direction.<sup>4</sup> That wishful thinking was dramatically swept aside on November 13, 2015, by the biggest terrorist attack on a Western city in over a decade, which occurred with

no advance warning and in defiance of the prevailing analytical assumption that the Islamic State was not even interested in mounting external attacks and moreover lacked the capability to do so. The fact that the operation's ringleader, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, was able to travel undetected from Belgium to Syria and then back again despite being among the most wanted men in Europe<sup>5</sup> should make us very circumspect about any conception we may have of fully understanding the Islamic State's capabilities and intentions—much less the threat that it will continue to pose after Mosul falls and its caliphate constricts and eventually collapses. In this context, it is worth recalling, too, that just two weeks before the Paris attacks, the Islamic State was able to perpetrate the single most significant attack against commercial aviation in over a decade. Over 200 persons perished when a bomb exploded shortly after takeoff aboard a Russian passenger jet in Egypt.

The Trump administration, accordingly, will be confronted with arguably the most parlous international security environment since the period immediately following the September 11, 2001, attacks—with serious threats emanating from not one but two terrorist movements and a counterterrorism strategy and approach that has failed.

## The Islamic State Post-Caliphate: A Continuing International Terrorist Threat

The Islamic State, alas, is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. However much the world may hope for its complete demise after the fall of Sirte, loss of Dabiq, impending collapse of its reign over Mosul, and hoped-for eventual defeat in Raqqa, it will continue to pose an international terrorist threat.

The Islamic State built an external operations network in Europe that completely escaped notice at least two years prior to the Paris attacks. The secretive Islamic State unit that serves as the external operations arm is known as Amn al-Kharji,<sup>6</sup> which is overseen by the amniyat, the Islamic State's "security" service that is also responsible for internal security.<sup>8</sup> It appears to function somewhat independently of the group's waning military and territorial fortunes. According to U.S. intelligence and defense officials quoted by Rukmini Callimachi in her revealing August 2016 *New York Times* article, the Islamic State has already deployed "hundreds of operatives" into the European Union with "hundreds more" having been dispatched to Turkey as well. This investment of operational personnel thus ensures that the Islamic State will retain an effective international terrorist strike capability irrespective of its battlefield reverses in Iraq and Syria for two reasons.<sup>7</sup> First is the obvious point that following its expulsion from Afghanistan, al-Qa`ida required very little territory between 2004 and 2014 to support its external

*Bruce Hoffman is a professor at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service where he directs the Center of Security Studies and the Security Studies Masters of Arts degree program. He is also the George H. Gilmore Senior Fellow at the U.S. Military Academy's Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.*

a The Amniyat "security" service is also known simply as *Enmi* (the Turkish rendering of the term) or *Amni* (in Arabic).

operations from its comparatively modest bases in Waziristan and the North West Frontier Province (where a succession of British al-Qa`ida operatives were trained and deployed back to the U.K. to carry out terrorist attacks).<sup>8</sup> And second, the Islamic State's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has already instructed<sup>9</sup> potential foreign fighters who are unable to travel to the caliphate to emigrate to other wilayats (where other Islamic State branches are located). This suggests that these other branches could develop their own external operations capabilities independent of the parent organization.

Moreover, in addition to the presumed sleeper cells that the Islamic State has already successfully seeded across Europe, there is the further problem of at least some of the thousands of European foreign fighters<sup>b</sup> serving in the Islamic State eventually returning home. They are only a fraction of the nearly 40,000 persons<sup>10</sup> from over 100 countries<sup>11</sup> who came to Syria and Iraq and, as Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recently warned, "might potentially leverage skills and experience to plan and execute attacks in the West." Citing the November 2015 Paris attacks as an example, he also warned "involvement of returned foreign fighters in terrorist plotting increases the effectiveness and lethality of terrorist attacks."<sup>12</sup>

What this means is that in approximately four years, the Islamic State's international cadre has surpassed even the most lavish estimates of the number of foreign fighters that the U.S. Intelligence Community believes journeyed to Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>c</sup> In other words, far more foreign nationals have been trained by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq than were by al-Qa`ida in the years preceding the 9/11 attacks.<sup>d</sup> This cadre of trained fighters thus recreates the same constellation of organizational capabilities and trained operatives that made al-Qa`ida so dangerous 15 years ago. The 9/11 Commission's assessment of al-Qa`ida's capability in this respect is particularly noteworthy. "Thousands flowed through" bin Laden's camps before the September 11th attacks, its report states, but "no more than a few hundred seem to have become al Qaeda members." This small number, hand-picked from the larger crop, were subsequently screened, vetted, and then provided with specialized terrorist training.<sup>13</sup> As Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger argue in their book, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, "the soaring numbers of foreign fighters in Syria generally, and in ISIS specifically, point ... to an increased risk of terrorism that could linger for years."<sup>14</sup> And, unlike the comparatively narrow geographical demographics of the al-Qa`ida recruits two decades ago, both the Islamic State's

and al-Qa`ida's current foreign fighters cadre includes hitherto unrepresented nationalities, such as hundreds of Latin Americans along with citizens from Mali, Benin, and Bangladesh, among other traditionally atypical jihadist recruiting grounds.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, the danger from so-called lone wolf attacks remains. In September 2014, the late Islamic State commander Abu Muhammad al-Adnani famously called on the group's far-flung adherents, active followers, and wannabes to commit random, independent acts of violence on the group's behalf.<sup>16</sup> According to the previously cited compilation of international Islamic State attacks, al-Adnani's summons has proven far more effective than al-Qa`ida's longstanding efforts similarly to animate, motivate, and inspire individuals across the globe to engage in violence in support of its aims.<sup>17</sup>

### Al-Qa`ida Über Alles

While the Islamic State has dominated the headlines and preoccupied the United States' attention for the past four years, al-Qa`ida has been quietly rebuilding and marshaling its resources for the continuation of its 20-year-long struggle against the United States. Indeed, its presence in Syria should be regarded as just as dangerous as and even more pernicious than that of the Islamic State.<sup>18</sup>

"The territory in the Middle East that al-Qaeda covets most is of course Saudi Arabia," the former radical Islamist Ed Husain explains, "but Syria is next on the list."<sup>19</sup> Syria or "al-Sham" is revered by al-Qa`ida as sacred land, cited in early Muslim scripture and history and referred to by the group in enormously evocative "end times" prophetic overtones. It also was once ruled under Islamic law as a single, unitary administrative entity encompassing present-day Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine as well as Syria. Within this geographical ambit is where the al-Haram al-Sharif - the Holy Precinct of Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock (from which the Prophet is reputed to have ascended to Heaven), and the al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third holiest shrine, are located. Moreover, some seven centuries ago, Ibn Taymiyah, among the jihadists' most venerated theologians, specifically commanded his Sunni followers to battle the reviled "Nusayris"—the Shi'a minority sect today known as Alawites, to which Bashar al-Assad and Syria's ruling clique belongs.<sup>20</sup> "For Sunni jihadist fighters," Husain notes, "the conflict in Syria is religiously underwritten by their most important teacher." And, unlike al-Qa`ida's longstanding South Asian base in Afghanistan, which, though part of the *ummah* is distant from Arab lands, Syria provides the group with a geographically central operational platform from which power, influence, and external attacks can be usefully projected in multiple directions.<sup>21</sup> Syria's proximity to both neighboring Jordan and Israel also realizes an al-Qa`ida dream: bringing it to the borders of precisely the pro-Western, apostate monarchies that the organization has long despised as well as to the very gates of its hated Zionist enemy.<sup>22</sup>

Hence, al-Qa`ida's attraction to Syria is nothing less than irresistible. After the group failed to intervene or assert itself in the seismic events that initiated the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, and saw itself initially relegated to only a supporting role in Libya, al-Qa`ida's senior leadership seized on the Syrian civil war as a golden opportunity with which to demonstrate the group's relevance and reestablish itself at the forefront of the jihadist movement. The priority that it attached to Syria may be seen in the special messages conveyed in February and June 2012 respectively by al-Zawahiri and the late Abu Yahya al-Libi, a Libyan bin Laden confidant, in support of the uprising against the Assad

b Nearly 7,000 European foreign fighters are believed to have traveled to Syria. Many, if not most of them are believed to have joined the Islamic State. See John Gatt-Rutter, director of counterterrorism division, European External Action Service (EEAS) quoted in Martin Banks, "Returning foreign fighters are biggest threat to EU, Parliament warned," *The Parliament: Politics, Policy And People Magazine*, October 12, 2016.

c "Estimates of the number of non-Afghan volunteers range from 4,000 to 25,000, with Arab fighters making up the majority." Gina Bennett, "The Wandering Mujahidin: Armed and Dangerous," *Weekend Edition: United States Department of State Bureau of Intelligence and Research*, August 21-22, 1993, pp. 1-2.

d "U.S. intelligence estimates the total number of fighters who underwent instruction in Bin Laden-supported camps in Afghanistan from 1996 through 9/11 at 10,000 to 20,000." National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States: Authorized Version* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 67.



*U.S. troops from the 101st Airborne Division train at an air assault school at an airbase in Camp Qayyara, 35 kilometers south of Mosul, Iraq, on October 4, 2003. (Ahmad Al-Rubaye/AFP/Getty Images)*

regime, which called on Muslims in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon to do everything within their power to assist in the overthrow of the Alawites.<sup>23</sup> Al-Qa`ida's spear-carrier in Syria was initially its Iraqi franchise, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>24</sup> But in April 2013, al-Baghdadi unilaterally absorbed Jabhat al-Nusra (which, despite the anodyne-sounding "Support Front" moniker, was al-Qa`ida's Syrian franchise) into his Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Al-Baghdadi also announced that he was changing the name of the newly amalgamated organization to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.<sup>25</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra rejected the merger and appealed to al-Zawahiri to intervene and order its reversal.<sup>26</sup> The conflict intensified as al-Zawahiri's efforts to mediate the dispute collapsed. The former ISI and Jabhat al-Nusra now found themselves locked in a bitter internecine struggle, prompting al-Zawahiri to formally expel ISI from the al-Qa`ida network.<sup>27</sup> A predictably febrile rivalry followed, which al-Qa`ida effectively exploited to endow itself with an image of comparative moderation—at least in contrast to the wanton bloodshed and unmitigated violence favored by the Islamic State.

In a bid to further insulate Jabhat al-Nusra from the negative consequences of its intimate association with al-Qa`ida, in July 2016 the group announced that it was severing "external ties"—as distinct from a complete break—with al-Qa`ida and re-branding itself, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham ("The Front for the Conquest of the Levant").<sup>28</sup> This is, in fact, nothing more than a well-established al-Qa`ida gambit to portray its satraps as more independent than they are and thereby avoid the pejorative implications that a more blatant relationship raises.<sup>29</sup> Al-Qa`ida has repeatedly, and successfully, used this ploy in the past to mask its continued close relations with groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, the Afghan Taliban, al-Shabaab, Ansar al-Din, and the variety of Ansar al-Shariah entities that emerged following the Arab Spring. The fact that Jabhat al-Nusra, regardless of what it calls itself, is even more capable than

the Islamic State and a more dangerous long-term threat seems completely immaterial to those across the region who not only support and assist it, but actively seek to partner with what they perversely regard as a more moderate and reasonable rival to the Islamic State.<sup>30</sup>

These deliberate obfuscations, both to eschew the al-Qa`ida name and to portray its most important franchise in a more benign light than the Islamic State, is a reflection of a calculated strategic choice taken by al-Zawahiri at a pivotal moment in al-Qa`ida's history. In 2013, he specifically instructed the movement's fighters to avoid mass-casualty operations in order not to cause the death of Muslim civilians and innocent women and children.<sup>31</sup> The legacy of this edict is evident in a tweet from a Dutch Jabhat al-Nusra fighter who eagerly reminded his followers that, unlike the Islamic State, "Al Qaeda focuses mostly on political & military targets instead of civilians." This development may be seen as fitting neatly into al-Zawahiri's apparent broader strategy of letting the Islamic State take all the heat and absorb all the blows from the coalition arrayed against it while al-Qa`ida quietly rebuilds its military strength and basks in its ironic cachet as "moderate extremists."<sup>32</sup> Anyone inclined to be taken in by this ruse would do well to heed the admonition of Theo Padnos (Peter Theo Curtis), the American journalist who spent two years in Syria as a hostage of Jabhat al-Nusra. Padnos relates how "the Nusra Front higher-ups were inviting Westerners to the jihad in Syria not so much because they needed more foot soldiers—they didn't—but because they want to teach the Westerners to take the struggle into every neighborhood and subway back home."<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the importance of Syria to al-Qa`ida's plans may be seen in the roster of senior commanders deployed to this critical theater. Among them was Muhsin al-Fadhli, another bin Ladin intimate who, until his death from a U.S. airstrike in 2015, had commanded



the Khorasan Group. This elite, forward-based al-Qa`ida operational arm in Syria is well-positioned to act either on its own or on Core al-Qa`ida's orders to strike in the Levant, across the Middle East, and potentially in Europe as well.<sup>34</sup> Even before the Khorasan Group had insinuated itself into the Levant, Haydar Kirkan, a Turkish national and longstanding al-Qa`ida operative, had been ordered in 2010 to return to his homeland—presumably by bin Ladin himself. Kirkan's mission was to facilitate the movement of key personnel hiding in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas to the Middle East so that they could escape the escalating American drone attack campaign.<sup>35</sup> Described by Pentagon officials as "a senior external terror attack planner in Syria," Kirkan was killed just weeks ago in a U.S. bombing raid in Idlib, Syria.<sup>36</sup> And in late 2015, al-Zawahiri reportedly dispatched Saif al-`Adl, al-Qa`ida's most experienced and battle-hardened senior commander, to Syria after his release from detention in Iran.<sup>37</sup> With this senior command structure in place in Syria, al-Qa`ida is thus well positioned to exploit the Islamic State's weakening military position and territorial losses. The Islamic State, in any event, can no longer compete with al-Qa`ida, whether in leadership depth, influence, reach, manpower, or cohesion. In only one domain is the Islamic State arguably stronger than its rival: the ability to mount spectacular terrorist strikes in Europe. And this is only because al-Qa`ida appears to have decided to suspend these operations for the time being. The leader of the group's wing in Syria, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, in an interview with Al Jazeera in May 2015 revealed al-Zawahiri had instructed him for the time being not to use Syria as a launching pad for attacks in the West.<sup>38</sup> And other al-Qa`ida affiliates have not attempted or plotted attacks in the West for the past three years, at least as far as has been publicly disclosed. Even the January 2015 attack on the Charlie Hebdo satirical newspaper in Paris that was ordered by AQAP dates back to plans apparently hatched in 2011.<sup>39</sup>

### Jihadi Super Group?

Looking to the future, the Islamic State's continuing setbacks and serial weakening are creating conditions where some type of reconciliation and re-amalgamation with al-Qa`ida might yet be effected.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, efforts to reunite have been continuous from both sides virtually from the time of the Islamic State's expulsion from al-Qa`ida. Al-Zawahiri himself recently called for unity and an end to the divisiveness that has afflicted the jihadist movement these past couple of years, even while he continued to deride al-Baghdadi and criticize what he derisively termed "an innovated caliphate." This, however, further underscores the profound personal enmity between these two men.<sup>41</sup>

For its part, Islamic State propaganda has often been respectful of al-Qa`ida, referring to its soldiers, emirs, and sheikhs in a positive manner and glorifying bin Ladin's and Anwar al-Awlaki's accomplishments. And even while profoundly critical of al-Zawahiri and some al-Qa`ida affiliates, the Islamic State still appears to have continually kept alive the possibility of some reconciliation, albeit alongside the ongoing invective and vituperation.

Despite the acknowledged differences in ideological emphases, tone, and style between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida, the main impediment to reconciliation is the intense personal enmity between al-Baghdadi and al-Zawahiri. Al-Baghdadi's death would doubtless pave the way for a rapprochement, producing a combined terrorist force of perhaps epic proportions. A continually weakened Islamic State might also splinter, with a rump faction either volun-

**"The Islamic State can no longer compete with al-Qa`ida, whether in leadership depth, influence, reach, manpower, or cohesion. In only one domain is the Islamic State arguably stronger: the ability to mount spectacular terrorist strikes in Europe."**

tarily merging with or else being forcibly absorbed by al-Qa`ida. Regardless of how such a modus vivendi or merger might occur, any kind of reconciliation between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida or re-amalgamation would profoundly change the current conflict and result in a significantly escalated threat of foreign fighter terrorist operations in the West. It would certainly enhance al-Qa`ida's international reach and endow it with a robust additional attack capability. Regardless of whether any such modus vivendi or hostile takeover ever comes to pass, it is indisputable that increased pressure on the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria will likely not result in the thousands of foreign fighters there simply laying down their arms. Rather if, as FBI Director James Comey argues, the 1990s Afghan exemplar provides any kind of a template for today,<sup>42</sup> there will be a surfeit of trained warriors drifting around the Middle East and North Africa either looking for new conflicts to embed themselves, new safe havens or sanctuaries in which to rest and regroup, or billing themselves as "guns for hire" and offering their services to a variety of eager patrons.

### Conclusion

The U.S.-led war on terrorism has now lasted longer than our participation in both world wars. It has surpassed even our active military involvement in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s. And, like the Viet Cong guerrillas and People's Army of Vietnam main force units, our jihadist enemies have locked us into an enervating war of attrition—the preferred strategy of terrorists and guerrillas the world over from time immemorial. They hope to undermine national political will, corrode internal popular support, and demoralize us and our regional partners through a prolonged, generally intensifying and increasingly geographical diffuse campaign of terrorism and violence. In his last publicly released, videotaped statement a dozen years ago, bin Ladin described this strategy on the eve of another presidential election. "So we are continuing this policy in bleeding America," he declared.

*"Allah willing, and nothing is too great for Allah... This is in addition to our having experience in using guerrilla warfare and the war of attrition to fight tyrannical superpowers, as we, alongside the mujahidin, bled Russia for 10 years, until it went bankrupt and was forced to withdraw in defeat."<sup>43</sup>*

Decisively breaking this stasis in the war on terrorism must therefore be among the new presidential administration's highest priorities. Our current counterterrorism strategy, however, has clearly failed to do this. The most recent elucidation of our approach is the 2015 National Security Strategy document. It explains how

the U.S.:

*“shifted away from a model of fighting costly, large-scale ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in which the United States—particularly our military—bore an enormous burden. Instead, we are now pursuing a more sustainable approach that prioritizes targeted counterterrorism operations, collective action with responsible partners, and increased efforts to prevent the growth of violent extremism and radicalization that drives increased threats.”<sup>44</sup>*

Yet, according to the National Counterterrorism Center, a year before the United States launched the ongoing effort to defeat the Islamic State, the group had a presence in only seven countries around the world. By 2015, the same year that the Obama administration’s counterterrorism strategy was enunciated, that number had nearly doubled. And as recently as this past August, the NCTC reported that the Islamic State was “fully operational” in 18 countries.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, al-Qa`ida is also present in more countries today (nearly two dozen by the author’s count) than it was in 2001—and in three times as many as when the Obama administration began in 2009. Today, a dangerous surfeit of foreign volunteers is fighting in Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Libya, and Mali as well as in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, the three pillars upon which this strategy is based—leadership attrition, training of local forces, and countering violent extremism—have thus far failed to deliver a crushing blow to these terrorist groups.

Indeed, until the recent gains against the Islamic State, in particular in Libya, Syria, and Iraq, a depressing pattern established itself where the United States killed terrorist leaders while they nonetheless seized more territory. Where we downsized our military, while the flow of recruits into their ranks continued. Where our intelligence collection capabilities diminished while they more effectively encrypted their communications to plan and implement attacks and exploited digital and social media for propaganda and recruitment. Given this litany of emerging and expanding challenges, the most critical question today is whether the United States can continue to build on these latest gains to ensure sustained, long-term progress.

A quarter of a century ago, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher described publicity as the oxygen of terrorism. Today, however, it is access to sanctuary and safe haven that sustains and nourishes terrorism. Accordingly, simply killing a small number of leaders in terrorist groups, whose ranks in any event are continually replenished, will not end the threats posed by the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida nor dislodge them from their bases of operation in the Levant and Iraq, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and South Asia. The slow and fractured process of training indigenous government security forces in those regions will not do so either. The inadequacy of these training activities and efforts to build partner capacity are evidenced by the mostly unimpeded escalation of terrorist activities in all those places. Whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, or Somalia, our efforts to build partner capacity have all foundered. In each, Islamist terrorist numbers grew faster than we were able to train indigenous security forces effectively; terrorist control over territory and the creation of new sanctuaries and safe havens expanded while governmental sovereignty contracted; and the terrorists’ operational effectiveness appreciably outpaced that of their government opponents. While there has been some recent progress in Mali, Nigeria, Syria, and Iraq, it is not clear whether the past problems that undermined the performance of indigenous mil-

itary units have been adequately addressed and reversed. The fact that Iraqi security forces remain incapable of retaking Mosul without the ground support of non-state militias such as the Kurdish peshmerga and Shi`a Popular Mobilization Forces; that the Afghan National Army remains dependent on American intelligence and air support and is effectively unable to contest the resurgence of Taliban, al-Qa`ida, and Islamic State violence in that country; and that the resurgence of al-Shabaab in Somalia despite nearly a decade of training of AMISOM’s training of Somali security forces raises uncomfortable questions about the effectiveness of our host-nation training efforts. Mali, for instance, was a model of U.S. partner training from 2002-2012, and President Obama once specifically cited the training of Yemen’s security forces as proof of the success of this leg of the administration’s counterterrorism strategy.<sup>46</sup>

Accordingly, the new administration should first conduct a complete reevaluation and systemic overhaul of our training and resourcing of foreign partners if we are to prevent the further spread of the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida branches and counter their entrenchment across the multiple regions in which they have already embedded themselves. A thoroughly new approach is needed to the current piecemeal training and uneven enhancement of host-nation counterterrorism capabilities. While increased U.S. combat air support is also required—especially in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and in support of French forces in Mali—that alone is not the answer. American and allied air strikes in coordination with local ground forces have not brought any of these counterterrorist campaigns to rapid conclusion. Therefore, in tandem with both the continued use of air power and deployment of supporting American special operations forces personnel, division-size conventional U.S. military forces might be usefully deployed on a strict 90-day rotation into violence-plagued rural areas and urban trouble spots. They have the necessary combat experience and skill-sets to sequentially eliminate terrorist strength in each of these areas and thereby enable indigenous security forces to follow in their wake to stabilize and police newly liberated places. By providing more effective governance and core services—with sustained U.S. and European support—host nations could thus better prevent the recurrence of terrorism and return of terrorist forces.

The current threat environment posed by the emergence and spread of the Islamic State and the stubborn resilience and long-game approach of al-Qa`ida makes a new strategy and new organizational and institutional behaviors necessary. The non-traditional challenges to U.S. national security and foreign policy imperatives posed by elusive and deadly irregular adversaries emphasizes the need to anchor changes that will more effectively close the gap between detecting irregular adversarial activity and rapidly defeating it. The effectiveness of this strategy will be based on our capacity to think like a networked enemy, in anticipation of how they may act in a variety of situations, aided by different resources. This goal requires that the U.S. national security structure organize itself for maximum efficiency, information sharing, and the ability to function quickly and effectively under new operational definitions. With this understanding in mind, we need to craft an approach that specifically takes into account the following key factors:

1. Separating the enemy from the populace that provides support and sustenance. This, in turn, entails three basic missions:

- a. Denial of enemy sanctuary and safe haven

- b. Elimination of enemy freedom of movement
- c. Denial of enemy resources and support;
- 2. Identification and neutralization of the enemy;
- 3. Creation of a secure environment—progressing from local to regional to global;
- 4. Ongoing and effective neutralization of enemy propaganda and information operations through the planning and execution of a comprehensive and integrated information operations and holistic civil affairs campaign in harmony with the first four tasks;
- 5. Interagency efforts to build effective and responsible civil governance mechanisms that eliminate the fundamental causes of terrorism and insurgency.

In sum, the adversaries we face today in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Mali, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere are much too resilient and the threats they pose too complicated to be vanquished by mere leadership decapitation. What is required to ensure success is a more integrated approach to a complex problem that is at once operationally durable, evolutionary, and elusive in character. We will therefore need to adjust and adapt our strate-

gy, resources, and tactics to formidable opponents that, as we have seen, are variegated, dispersed, mobile, resilient, and highly adaptive. A truly effective campaign will ineluctably be predicated upon a strategy that effectively combines the tactical elements of systematically weakening and destroying enemy capabilities alongside the equally critical, broader strategic imperative of breaking the cycle of terrorist and insurgent recruitment and replenishment, which have respectively sustained al-Qa`ida and fueled the Islamic State's emergence and rapid numerical and geographical expansion. The vast numerical proliferation and geographical expansion of foreign fighters joining both the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida in recent years underscores the failure of the current strategy's counter-messaging efforts.

The key to success will thus be in harnessing the overwhelming kinetic force of the U.S. military as part of a comprehensive vision to transform capabilities in order to deal with irregular and unconventional threats. A successful strategy will therefore also be one that thinks and plans ahead with a view toward addressing the threats likely to be posed by terrorist and insurgent generations beyond the current one. **CTC**

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# The Islamic State's External Operations and the French-Belgian Nexus

By Jean-Charles Brisard and Kévin Jackson

**Judging by the number of plots and attacks hatched by Syrian returnees, the Islamic State's francophone cadre appears to be the most active of the organization's Western contingent. Often operating together in Syria, a number of these recruits showed an early proclivity toward striking their home country. The peer dynamics of the group provided the Islamic State with a valuable pool of determined recruits, which would prove crucial in the development of the organization's external operations capacity. These factors led to a sustained tempo in terrorist activities in France and Belgium from early 2014 onward, culminating with the mass casualty attacks in Paris and Brussels.**

A year ago in November, an Islamic State cell killed 130 in Paris in the deadliest terrorist attack in modern French history. Four months later, the remaining members of the cell killed 32 at the Brussels airport and metro. As investigations into the attacks proceeded, it soon became clear that most of the perpetrators, planners, and ringleaders of this Islamic State terror campaign were not foreign operatives, but mostly French and Belgian nationals who had grown up in the countries they attacked.

This article outlines what the investigations have uncovered so far about the francophone Islamic State network behind the Paris and Brussels attacks, as well as earlier attacks and plots, by drawing on court documents and judgments related to multiple European terrorism cases. It draws on interviews with European and American counterterrorism officials as well and a database on French foreign fighters maintained by the Center for the Analysis of Terrorism (CAT).

The Islamic State's francophone cadre has plotted and executed more attacks on European soil than any of the group's other contingents of Western foreign fighters.<sup>1</sup> This has partly been a function of

the large numbers of French and Belgians<sup>a</sup> who have been recruited into the group, in addition to the Islamic State senior leadership's focus on targeting France, as voiced by the group's late spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, in September 2014.<sup>2</sup>

## The Original Cluster: Katibat al-Muhajirin

In Syria, since 2013, French and Belgian militants from a variety of networks quickly came to socialize by sharing housing and fighting in the same units. Owing to this overlap, it should come as no surprise that the French-speaking cluster involved in the Islamic State's external operations developed strong interpersonal ties, sometimes building on kinship that pre-dated the Syrian jihad.

The Katibat al-Muhajirin (KAM) in particular was a magnet for francophone volunteers to the Syrian jihad. Composed mainly of Belgian and French jihadis, as well as a few Dutch and Germans, and based in northwestern Aleppo, KAM formed the foreign detachment of Majlis al-Shura al-Mujahidin, whose leader, Amr al-Absi, became the Islamic State governor of Aleppo after throwing his support behind Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in mid-2013.<sup>3</sup> Among KAM's key figures were its first leader, Houssien Elouassaki, a former Sharia4Belgium follower, and Chaquir Maaroufi, a media-friendly French jihadi best known as "Abou Shaheed."<sup>4</sup>

While fighting in Syria, a number of KAM members expressed an early interest in external action and/or ostensibly praised those who had conducted such operations, notably Mohamed Merah who perpetrated the March 2012 Toulouse and Montauban attacks.<sup>5</sup> According to Zakaria Amzil, a French foreign fighter who returned from Syria, part of the cluster was inclined to return home to undertake terrorist activity and had been trained for this purpose. Some of them, he added, even took care to conceal their identity and appearance on social media, in case they ever returned to Europe.<sup>6</sup>

One of those supportive of launching attacks was Tyler Vilus, a French convert who reportedly left for Syria with Maaroufi. In August 2013, Vilus publicly urged his French followers to launch attacks at home, especially by targeting police stations and personnel.<sup>7</sup> Others in KAM not only supported jihad inside Europe but had been linked to plots on French soil prior to their arrival in Syria. For instance, a comrade of Vilus named Rached Riahi took part with others from the "Cannes-Torcy network"<sup>8</sup> in scouting military

*Jean-Charles Brisard is Chairman of the Center for the Analysis of Terrorism (CAT) and the former chief investigator for the 9/11 families' lawyers. He is the author of Zarqawi, the New Face of al-Qaeda. Follow @JcBrisard*

*Kévin Jackson is Research Director at the Center for the Analysis of Terrorism (CAT) and contributor at the Jihadica academic blog. Follow @alleyesonjihad*

a As of September 2016, 1,112 French nationals or residents and 537 Belgian nationals or residents have traveled to Syria and Iraq. The Belgian numbers include both French-speaking and non-French-speaking. "European Jihad Watch," Center for the Analysis of Terrorism (CAT), October 2016.

b The Cannes-Torcy network grew from ties formed between militants in Cannes and others in Torcy (in the Paris region) around its charismatic leader Jérémie Louis-Sidney, a former drug dealer. Its members participated in an attack against a Jewish grocery in September 2012 and were involved in subsequent plots against military targets. Some network members relocated to Syria.

targets in southern France during the summer of 2012.<sup>8</sup>

## Early Attack Plots

The KAM anti-Western current soon translated into attack plots being mounted by a handful of its alumni. In January 2014, Ibrahim Boudina and Abdelkader Tliba, both previously part of the Cannes-Torcy network, returned to Europe, following similar itineraries and carrying an identical amount of cash with them. Boudina brought a bomb-making manual and a list of contacts, including militants he met in Syria, as well as instructions on how to communicate securely. Before his arrest in Mandelieu-la-Napoules in southern France in February, Boudina had built triacetone triperoxide (TATP)-based explosives devices, acquired a gun, and researched a range of potential targets, including military bases, the Jewish Defense League, Charlie Hebdo, and a carnival. It has been reported that the Nice carnival<sup>9</sup> was the ultimate target chosen by Boudina.<sup>10</sup>

Mehdi Nemmouche, a French extremist who arrived in Syria in December 2012, was also part of KAM and, according to Amzil, belonged to a group led by the Belgian terrorist operative Abdelhamid Abaaoud whose aim was to commit terrorist attacks in Belgium.<sup>11</sup> He left the country around the same time as Boudina and Tliba, with whom he was apparently well-acquainted.<sup>e</sup> Once in Turkey, on January 16, 2014, he was called from Belgium by Abaaoud, who was himself a KAM member and would later play a key role in the Paris attacks. Earlier that day, Nemmouche had tried to contact Dniel Mahi, another KAM alumnus also then in Belgium and a close friend of Abaaoud.<sup>12</sup> After a circuitous journey throughout Southeast Asia, Nemmouche spent several weeks in Molenbeek before his attack against the Jewish Museum of Brussels in May 2014, the first successful one carried out in Europe on behalf of the Islamic State.<sup>13</sup>

Although the above-mentioned Syrian returnees were all Islamic State members, the level of organizational command and control remains difficult to assess. In addition to the absence of any official claim of responsibility, it is also worth noting that Nemmouche complained about the lack of support he faced upon returning from Syria.<sup>d</sup>

In any case, it appears that, by late 2013, the Islamic State had already started building the machinery to launch external attacks, as assessed, for instance, by Dutch intelligence.<sup>14</sup> A returned French jihadi, Mourad Fares, recounted that a prominent figure involved in building up the group's external attacks capability was Abu Usama al-Madani, a senior Saudi leader running the Islamic State's foreign fighters affairs. As such, al-Madani handled the recruitment for a secret training program to dispatch volunteers back home for operational purposes.<sup>15</sup>

The account of Nils Donath, a German extremist who at one point joined the Islamic State's security-intelligence apparatus (*am-niyat*), further indicated that the organization envisioned striking the "far enemy" on its own soil, before declaring a caliphate. Donath told interrogators after his return to Germany that during the first half of 2014, recruits could add their names to a list of those willing to perform external work.<sup>e</sup>

## Growing Ambition

While the cases outlined above point to an early interest in striking the West, it appears the Islamic State only truly institutionalized and invested in an external operations wing in the second half of 2014,<sup>16</sup> leading to its first large-scale and centrally directed action in Europe with the "Verviers" plot. Preceded by an open threat against the West from the group's senior leadership in September of that year,<sup>17</sup> the plot was thwarted after a firefight with Belgian commandos in the eastern Belgian town in mid-January 2015. The alarm created in Belgium was celebrated at length by Abaaoud via official media channels roughly a month later, indicating an organizational undertaking.<sup>18</sup>

Aimed against law enforcement, the project gathered a predominantly Belgian-French web of militants, most of whom had had jihadist experience in Syria. In Belgium, the groundwork was laid by the Moroccan Souhaib el-Abdi and the Pakistani Mohammed Hamza Arshad Mahmood Najmi, who both returned via Turkey in early October 2014 after roughly a month in Syria. Together with Marouane el-Bali, el-Abdi's closest friend, they tapped into their social network to acquire forged documents, weapons, ammunitions, and police uniforms. Despite their own strong suspicions that they were under surveillance, the trio went on to rent a safe house and several cars, stockpile weapons and ammunition, purchase chemicals, and drive to pick up Belgian Khalid Ben Larbi and Sofiane Amghar in France and Germany, where they had just arrived from Syria, and bring them back to Belgium.<sup>19</sup>

Turkey and Greece were used as major facilitation and command hubs for the plot. A group of French operatives who were also selected to participate in the planned attack used Greece and Turkey as gateways to return from Syria. All belonged to the "Trappes network," a cluster of extremists from the eponymous town 20 miles southwest of Paris. Among them was Walid Hamam, a KAM member who posed as a Syrian refugee in Greece.<sup>20</sup> He had previously been part of an external operations network in Lebanon in which Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, one of the group's then top leaders, and Chaquir Maaroufi were also involved.<sup>f</sup> Another important figure in the Trappes network based in Greece was Wissem el-Mokhtari, who was close to Hamam, as well as Foued Mohamed-Aggad, one of the

c During his detention, Nemmouche talked about the "Cannes brothers" to a fellow inmate, referring to those from the Cannes-Torcy network who had traveled to Syria. There, Riahi and Nemmouche were both part of KAM, and given that Riahi remained very close to his childhood friends Boudina and Tliba, it is highly likely that Nemmouche also spent time with the latter. See Matthieu Suc, "Mehdi Nemmouche, le djihadiste qui parlait trop," *Mediapart*, September 7, 2016.

d During a conversation with the fellow inmate, Nemmouche told him that after his return from Syria, he had felt that "everybody had let him down" and that he had ended up roofless with virtually no financial resources. See Suc, "Mehdi Nemmouche, le djihadiste qui parlait trop."

e To get the green light to deploy overseas, Donath claimed he first went to Reda Seyam, a senior German-Egyptian Islamic State member who was the deputy to the Islamic State "governor" of Aleppo. He, in turn, told Donath to first obtain clearance from his supervisor within the *amniyat*. With that clearance, he went back to Seyam, who said he would recommend this course of action to his own superior. According to Donath, his request was a ruse to allow him to leave the territory of the Islamic State. Authors' interview, source close to Donath's case, October 2016.

f This network made of French, Saudis, and Levantine jihadis was dismantled from June 2014 onward. It planned to strike a wide range of targets, including hotels. For more background on this network, see Rukmini Callimachi, "How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror Under Europe's Gaze," *New York Times*, March 29, 2016.





*Le Bataclan in Paris in October 2016 (Bernard Menigault/Corbis via Getty Images)*

Bataclan assailants.<sup>21</sup>

Operating from Turkey and then Greece, Abaaoud emerged as a leading figure in this French-Belgian network, directly supervising the deployment from Syria and reception in Western Europe of the Verviers Islamic State attack team, as well as providing them with operational guidance. Unable to return to Belgium, Abaaoud maintained extensive communications with his accomplices there and played a central and dominant role in coordinating the Verviers cell's activities, from operational security issues to division of labor. Additionally, he acted as a key node between Europe and Syria by relaying instructions from the Islamic State's upper echelons to the cell and updating the group's headquarters about their overseas operatives' activities. Besides the Syrian-Turkish region, Abaaoud also reported to contacts in Libya, notably discussing financial and travel issues of the Verviers cell's members.<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that Abaaoud and his two acolytes, Ben Larbi and Amghar, were affiliated to Katibat al-Battar, a Libyan-dominated Islamic State battalion, which by 2015 had sent hundreds of fighters back to Libya to build up the group's presence there.<sup>23</sup>

### A Broad Recruitment Campaign

Following the Verviers plot's failure, the Islamic State made clear there would be no let-up in its commitment to target the West, with al-Adnani warning that "what lies ahead will be worse ... for you haven't seen anything from us just yet."<sup>24</sup> Besides sharpening its anti-Western rhetoric and issuing operational advice to its sympathizers through its media outlets, the group also mobilized its core members for a campaign of attacks in Europe. In the spring of 2015, for instance, foreign recruits attended a Friday sermon in Raqqa delivered by Mohamed Mahmoud, a notorious German militant figure, during which he advocated attacks against Germany and portrayed jihad in Europe as a duty.<sup>25</sup> Several accounts from Islamic

State militants detained on their return by European security services indicated the Islamic State was intensifying its external attack planning, with onetime French recruit Reda Hame describing their efforts in and around Raqqa in June 2015 as a "real factory."<sup>26</sup> According to these accounts, willing candidates could sign up for external operations, mirroring the procedure described by Fares and Donath.<sup>27</sup> According to one Islamic State returnee, francophone recruits proved the most eager to strike home, while German and British members expressed more reluctance.<sup>28</sup>

In planning attacks, the Islamic State's external operations wing underwent a vetting and approval process, based on its enlisted volunteers' files, to identify suitable recruits for its terrorist plots. For instance, close attention was paid as to whether a candidate had a media profile or was wanted at home, even though numerous operatives eventually selected were already known by their home country's security services.<sup>29</sup> It appears that the *amniyat* (security service) led these efforts, with some of its operatives entrusted with facilitating and planning attacks overseas.<sup>30</sup> The Islamic State itself hinted at the central role of this security body when referring to its clandestine operations outside of its Syrian-Iraqi territory. In its statement claiming the March 2016 Brussels attacks, for example, the Islamic State characterized the suicide-bombers as part of a "security detachment" (*mafraza amniya*) of the group.<sup>31</sup>

It is worth noting here that a number of French and Belgians involved in external operations have also served as intelligence and security assets for the organization. Perhaps the most prominent French Islamic State member, Boubaker el-Hakim, a veteran French-Tunisian jihadi, was said to hold a senior position in the *amniyat* and to maintain a relationship with al-Adnani.<sup>32</sup> Two other security operatives, the French Salim Benghalem—a close associate of el-Hakim and widely believed to play a role in foreign plots—and the Belgian Najim Laachraoui—the bomb-maker of the Paris and

Brussels attacks and previously part of KAM—were known to enjoy the trust of the group’s upper echelons.<sup>33</sup> Together with their comrade Nemmouche, Benghalem and Laachraoui acted as captors to local and Western hostages in Aleppo.<sup>34</sup> Other Belgian and French jihadis, like Vilus, also worked in the *amniyat*.<sup>35</sup>

While French and Belgian militants proved particularly active in international plots, they still had to report up the chain of command. Abaaoud did not act on his own in the Verviers plot, for example, and in another case, he told French Islamic State recruit Hame, whom he groomed in Syria, that he had to wait for his emir’s feedback before moving forward with the plan.<sup>36</sup> According to Nicolas Moreau, a French Islamic State defector, Abaaoud’s supervisors included two Tunisians who had the final say over the vetting process and dispatch.<sup>37</sup> Several Tunisians appear to have held a senior role in the group’s external operations wing. For example, a Syrian operative sent to participate in an attack in Dusseldorf, Germany, contended that he knew his operational leader as Abu Dujana al-Tunisi, also dubbed the “emir of the foreigners.”<sup>38</sup> Al-Adnani was likely the highest-ranking leader directly involved in approving for foreign attacks.<sup>39</sup>

### Quick Training and Deployment

During the first half of 2015, the Islamic State took a new approach in trying to get an attack through in Europe: quickly training and dispatching fresh recruits in Syria back to Europe, instead of sending experienced fighters as in the Verviers plot. Given that these recruits primarily came to join the Syrian jihad, personalized attention was given by senior operatives within the external operation wing to redirect them away from their original goal. This approach was notably discussed by Harry Sarfo, a German Islamic State recruit who was detained in July 2015 on his return to Europe. Sarfo traveled to Tal Abyad, Syria, in April 2015 and shortly after, he claimed he was courted there by two Frenchmen who worked in the *amniyat* and asked him if he would consider returning home to undertake an attack. When Sarfo replied that that was not the reason he had come to Syria, he was told that the organization did not need more European recruits at that point and that jihad instead must be launched in the West.<sup>40</sup>

Although Sarfo claimed to have declined the offer, other newly arrived recruits ended up in plots on French soil after interacting with a small number of external operations personnel who managed to “sell” external action to them.

One of these was Sid Ahmed Ghlam, an Algerian national who is presumed to have spent time in Syria in October-November 2014 and then in February 2015. There, the engineering student is believed by investigators to have linked up with a handful of French-speaking militants—including Abdel Nasser Ben Youcef, a seasoned Algerian jihadi once active in Afghanistan and the Caucasus, and two Tunisian jihadis. Obviously interested in Ghlam’s profile, these militants approached the wannabe fighter to convince him that his duty was to help the Islamic State strike France, playing on a narrative of revenge against coalition airstrikes in Syria and Iraq in which terrorism in the West is framed as a necessary retaliation.<sup>41</sup>

In another case, the French recruit Reda Hame traveled to Syria in early June 2015 as he considered it his duty to make his *hijrah* (emigration) and fight there. As soon as he arrived in Syria, Abaaoud attempted to recruit him for an attack in Europe. Abaaoud first asked the newcomer if he would be inclined to strike abroad,

before pitching to him the virtues of this type of operation to make him more receptive to the idea. As part of his hard sell, Abaaoud argued that Hame would obtain the rewards of two martyrs and that if he had the proper papers to travel, he himself would have performed such an action, even against his emir’s will. Additionally, Abaaoud showed Hame the damage caused by the coalition airstrikes in Raqqa to underline how “lucky” he was to be able to take revenge at home instead of staying in Syria.<sup>42</sup>

To avoid raising suspicions at home, these fresh recruits were to be deployed as soon as possible to make it seem like they had just spent some time on holiday in Turkey.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, they did not follow the standard training curriculum and were not tested on the battlefield, but instead underwent rudimentary weapons training. In addition to operational security training, they were also schooled in communicating and storing information securely to avoid detection once in Europe. Ghlam, for instance, relayed that he was taught by a francophone, computer-savvy operative nicknamed Abu Omar<sup>44</sup> how to use encryption tools, including software like PGP, to send and receive messages and files, which he did abundantly upon his return to France.<sup>44</sup>

Before their departure from Syria, the selected recruits and their handlers agreed upon communication protocols to maintain contact, which involved creating several online accounts and sharing access to them. Multiple email addresses were used for the planned attack by Ghlam, with the latter also creating a Skype account to maintain communication back to base. It is worth mentioning that at least one of Ghlam’s handlers used the same alias (Amirouche) of an external operations figure involved in the Verviers plot, thus raising the possibility of a nexus between these plots. As for Hame, he was given the Turkish cell number and online contact of Abaaoud who instructed him not to call from Turkey but instead wait until he reached Prague.<sup>45</sup>

During their short Syrian stay, the selected operatives and their handlers also discussed types of targets and outlined the parameters of the attacks, even though operational details remained to be determined in the latter stages of the plot. If the Verviers cell targeted security forces, subsequent planned attacks suggest that external operations personnel then heavily focused on civilian targets with a penchant for *inghimasi*-style attacks, where an operative executes his operation until he is killed either by intervention forces or by using a suicide-vest. For instance, Abaaoud and Hame discussed the idea of attacking a place of public gathering, including a rock concert, with an automatic weapon in France, Belgium, or the U.K.<sup>46</sup>

Even though these plans required fewer resources than the high-profile Verviers plot, the dispatched operatives were not necessarily meant to act alone. Indeed, communications between Ghlam and his Syria-based contacts referred to other “brothers” who were meant to strike simultaneously, even though this never materialized. Hame, for his part, was meant to team up with Abdeljalil Ait el-Kaid, a Spanish resident of Moroccan origin who joined the Islamic State in 2014.

After having been provided with funding for their initial expenses outside Syria, the Islamic State recruits returned to Europe where they continued to receive material assistance from their group. Abaaoud promised Hame that once home, the Islamic State could easily facilitate his access to weapons.<sup>47</sup> This claim can be cor-

g It is not clear whether this was Abdelhamid Abaaoud.

roborated by the fact that, while in Syria, external operations figures managed to facilitate the purchase of, among other items, weapons, ammunition, and bulletproof vests for Ghلام through their militant contacts in France. Afterward, Ghلام's handlers pointed him toward a car in a parking garage where he could find them.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout the attack's planning, encrypted communications between Ghلام and the external operations personnel often centered on progress reports and operational guidance. Ghلام's handlers instructed him to attack a crowded church, an operation that would "relieve" the Islamic State from owing to the hardships then facing the group, they told him. Ghلام, for his part, kept his handlers updated on his activities, notifying them about his reconnaissance missions around potential targets. He also sought their approval and tactical advice on how to proceed in the planning and execution of his operation, including on the most trivial details like if they would agree with him wearing a mask during the attack. If he survived the attack, Ghلام also discussed the possibility of a follow-up attack, this time against public transportation.<sup>49</sup>

### Setting in Motion a Terror Campaign in Europe

By the summer of 2015, the Islamic State stepped up its external efforts by directing a large number of operatives, leaving Syria in small groups, to launch a major wave of violence in Western Europe. The opening of the migrants' "Balkan route," following the Macedonian decision to allow migrants 72-hour permits to transit through the country,<sup>50</sup> offered the group a unique momentum; it could now dispatch its skilled veterans with more ease by using forged Syrian passports, even though they were on European extremist watchlists. As a result, nearly all Paris and Brussels attackers came back to Europe using forged Syrian passports and infiltrated the refugee flow. The only notable exception was Vilus, who was arrested in Turkey in late July 2015 on his way to Western Europe. Sent by Abaaoud to attack France,<sup>51</sup> Vilus used a real Swedish pass-

port belonging to another Islamic State member.<sup>52</sup> While the organization was castigating Syrians fleeing its self-styled caliphate for Europe, it was cynically capitalizing on the refugee influx to further its global agenda.

A key step facilitating this came in June-July 2015, when Abaaoud entrusted a young Algerian named Bilal C. with mapping out the "Balkan route" by checking border controls and smuggling opportunities. The scouting mission took Bilal C. from Syria to Turkey, Greece, the Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria. During his trip, the Algerian continuously informed Abaaoud on any open border crossings, waiting times, and arrival and departure routes.<sup>53</sup> While Abaaoud's whereabouts during this timeframe long remained murky, new information from European investigations reveal that the Belgian Islamic State operative took the same route to enter Europe, traveling from Syria to Turkey, Greece, the Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, Germany and Belgium.<sup>54</sup> His return to Europe, despite being on the radar screen of security agencies, speaks volumes about his determination to have a direct hand in the forthcoming attacks.<sup>55</sup>

These investigations also unveil that, closely following the footsteps of Bilal C., Abaaoud traveled to Europe with Ayoub el-Khazzani, a Moroccan national who had been in Syria since May and who also received travel reports from Bilal C. While few details have emerged about his trajectory so far, el-Khazzani's direct links to Abaaoud now establish that he was part of an Islamic State plot. By August 1, 2015, the two were in Hungary. Staying together in a hotel in Budapest, they parted ways on August 4 when Abaaoud left for Austria by car and el-Khazzani left for Vienna by train the day after. In the meantime, Bilal C., who had been briefly detained in Hungary in mid-July, left the refugee camp he was staying in and managed to make his way to Germany.<sup>56</sup> Their return to Europe quickly manifested into another plot, with el-Khazzani's failed assault against a Thalys train on August 21.

*Figure 1: The Paris-Brussels Attack Network Dispatched from Syria*

Suspect	False ID	Entry in Europe	Pick up date (location)
<b>Scout</b>			
Bilal C.	Jdjad Samas	July 16, 2015 (Hungary)	Unknown
<b>Ringleader</b>			
Abdelhamid Abaaoud	Unknown	Aug 1, 2015 (Hungary)	Unknown
<b>Stade de France</b>			
Bilal Hadfi	Unknown	Aug 25, 2015 (Hungary)	Aug 30, 2015 (Hungary)
Unknown	Ahmad al-Mohammad	Oct 3, 2015 (Greece)	Unknown
Unknown	Mohammad al-Mahmood	Oct 3, 2015 (Greece)	Unknown
<b>Bataclan</b>			
Ismael Mostefai	Salah Jamal	Sept 9, 2015 (Hungary)	Sept 17, 2015 (Hungary)
Samy Amimour	Husein Alkhlf	Sept 9, 2015 (Hungary)	Sept 17, 2015 (Hungary)
Foued Mohamed-Aggad	Foad Moosa	Sept 9, 2015 (Hungary)	Sept 17, 2015 (Hungary)
<b>Mobile Team</b>			
Brahim Abdeslam	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Chakib Akrouh	Unknown	Aug 25, 2015 (Hungary)	Aug 30, 2015 (Hungary)
<b>Support / Brussels Attacks</b>			
Mohamed Belkaid	Soufiane Kayal	Sept 3, 2015 (Hungary)	Sept 9, 2015 (Hungary)
Najim Laachraoui	Samir Bouzid	Sept 3, 2015 (Hungary)	Sept 9, 2015 (Hungary)
<b>Others</b>			
Osama Krayem*	Naim al-Hamed	Oct 2, 2015 (Germany)	Oct 2, 2015 (Germany)
Sofien Ayari**	Monir al-Haj Ahmed	Oct 2, 2015 (Germany)	Oct 2, 2015 (Germany)
A. Ahmed	Ahmad al-Khald	Oct 2, 2015 (Germany)	Oct 2, 2015 (Germany)
Adel Haddadi***	Khaled al-Omar	Oct 3, 2015 (Greece)	Never materialized
Muhamad Usman***	Faisal al-Aifan	Oct 3, 2015 (Greece)	Never materialized

The above table is based on information obtained by the authors from the Hungarian Counter-Terrorism Center (TEK). The column on entry in Europe refers to their first known entry and not necessarily the first country they entered Europe through. The false identity column refers to their name on false identity papers.

\* Krayem is suspected to have been initially part of a planned attack against Amsterdam's Schiphol airport on November 13, 2015 that never happened

\*\* Sofien Ayari is suspected to have been initially part of a planned attack against Amsterdam's Schiphol airport on November 13, 2015 that never happened

\*\*\* Haddadi and Usman were supposed to participate in the Paris attacks but did not join the Belgium-based attackers in time



During this time, a Belgium-based jihadist network deeply tied to the mother organization in Syria dealt with facilitation and material support for the terrorist campaign to come. According to the Islamic State, brothers Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakraoui played the most pivotal part in these preparations, stating “it was firstly due to ... Ibrahim and his brother that the raid in Paris took place.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed, they drew on their contacts in criminal circles to stockpile weapons and participated in accommodating Syria jihadist returnees in Belgium.<sup>58</sup> Salah Abdeslam, Mohamed Abrini, Ahmed Dahmani, and a few others also proved helpful in providing logistical support. For example, these three are strongly suspected to have traveled to the Netherlands in August to acquire weapons via their contacts.<sup>59</sup> It was also through criminal contacts that Syria returnees such as Laachraoui obtained forged Belgian passports upon their return.<sup>60</sup>

Newly obtained evidence from the investigations has shed further light on the role in the conspiracy of Abdeslam, a longtime friend of Abaaoud with whom he kept contact after the latter's departure to Syria, as a key logistical conduit for the Syrian veterans in Europe, playing a critical role in assembling the attack teams.<sup>61</sup> Between August and October 2015, Abdeslam made four round trips from Belgium to Central Europe—three to Hungary and one to Germany—to pick up fighters the Islamic State had infiltrated into Europe. He first traveled to Kiskoros, Hungary, on August 30 to pick up Bilal Hadfi and Chakib Akrouh, two Paris attackers, who had arrived in the country five days earlier. On September 9, 2015, Abdeslam made another trip to Budapest where Laachraoui and Mohamed Belkaid, an Algerian with a leading role among the returnees, had been staying since September 3. The last trip to Budapest occurred on September 17 when Abdeslam picked up the three Bataclan attackers—Sami Amimour, Ismaël Omar Mostefaï, and Foued Mohamed-Aggad—who had arrived at a hotel in Budapest a week earlier.

The fourth Abdeslam trip—to Ulm, Germany, on October 2—was to bring three other returnees named Osama Krayem, Sofiane Ayari, and a third known as A. Ahmed, whose forged Syrian and Belgian documents were later recovered in Belgium. A. Ahmed also came to Europe via Hungary where he stayed at the Bicske refugee center. He was later arrested in Hungary before going to Austria and fleeing to Turkey on November 16 and is now believed to be in Syria.<sup>62</sup>

Two of the Stade de France suicide bombers, Iraqi nationals using passports under the names of Ahmad al-Mohammad and Mohammad al-Mahmood, gained access to Europe through the migrants' route on October 3, 2015. They entered Europe with at least two other jihadis who were caught before reaching Paris in time for the attacks, the Algerian Adel Haddadi and the Pakistani Muhamad Usman.<sup>63</sup>

These militants were far from being the only ones dispatched by the organization to Europe. Investigations have revealed that other operatives were also sent to Europe during the fall and winter of 2015. These included Youcef Bouimaiz, an Algerian, and Kamal Agoujil, a Moroccan, who were arrested in the same Salzburg refugee center attended by Usman and Haddadi.<sup>64</sup> This refugee camp also hosted three Syrian nationals who, according to the investigators, were also Islamic State operatives and were eventually arrested in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany last September.<sup>65</sup> Also, a Moroccan national named Abid Tabouni, who Haddadi and Usman connected with in Salzburg after he made his way via the refugee route, was

arrested in Brussels in July 2016.<sup>66</sup>

## Command and Control Processes

The Paris and Brussels attacks were the outcome of a year of effort by the Islamic State to target Europe. While the organization's set of targets had long been centered on civilian gatherings, such as places of entertainment and public transportation, the operatives were still allowed to determine the specific timing and targets depending on circumstances on the ground and security concerns. As these attacks reflected, their implementation was not without setbacks. For example, the investigation suggests that the initial plan of Abaaoud and his accomplices was more ambitious than what was carried out, involving attacks in other locations such as the Netherlands<sup>67</sup> where Krayem and Ayari are suspected to have planned an operation against Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport.<sup>68</sup>

Despite changes in the operational agenda, the broad targeting guidelines set by the Islamic State were followed and some targets had long been contemplated. For instance, even though the Brussels attacks were triggered by the security pressure felt by the operatives after several police raids in Belgium days earlier, the Zaventem airport had been “selected,” according to Belgian court records, as a potential target by the Verviers cell more than a year before the attack on March 22, 2016. In a cell phone used by Abaaoud in Greece, the investigators had recovered several sketches of a man pushing a trolley carrying a bomb with signs indicating “Zaventem” and “arrivals,” and another drawing featuring a taxi.<sup>69</sup>

Despite their operational flexibility, the Islamic State operatives sent to Europe made sure to maintain communications with their principals in Syria, sending progress reports and being provided with instructions and money transfers.<sup>70</sup> These regular contacts illustrated the robust command and control in the group's external operations planning.

This aspect is further evidenced by the data recovered from a laptop used by the Islamic State members behind the Paris and Brussels attacks. Among the evidence recovered were target lists, audio recordings, and text messages. A folder titled “November 13” contained several files investigators believe detailed the architecture of the plot: “Omar group” (a probable reference to Abaaoud's kunya), “French group” (a probable reference to the three Bataclan attackers), “Iraqi group” (in reference to the Iraqi suicide bombers who targeted the Stade de France), “Schiphol group” (a likely reference to the Amsterdam airport), and “Metro group” (that could reference the Brussels metro bombing or indicate a future target).<sup>71</sup>

The laptop highlighted the central role in the Paris and Brussels attack network of a senior Belgian operative based in Raqqa known as “Abu Ahmad,” whose real name is Osama Ahmad Mohammad Atar. He was born in Belgium in 1984, and is a cousin of the Bakraoui brothers. Atar is a jihadist veteran who first traveled to Iraq as early as 2002. After being arrested in Ramadi in 2005, he was convicted by an Iraqi criminal court to life imprisonment in 2007, a sentence later reduced to 10 years. He was subsequently sent to several detention facilities, including Camp Bucca, known to have hosted Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He was freed in 2012 after an intense media campaign and traveled to Syria soon after.<sup>72</sup>

Audio and text communications exchanged through encrypted messaging applications with the attacks' bomb maker, Laachraoui, indicate that Abu Ahmad oversaw the plot from Syria and provided guidance on the targets. A plan was discussed for a massive bomb

attack. Another was to target France again on the eve of the Euro 2016 soccer championship or to kidnap “one or two heads” to free several jihadis, including Nemmouche, the Brussels Jewish Museum attacker. Laachraoui and one of the Bakraoui brothers also reported to him on the modus operandi and operatives to be involved. Abu Ahmad advised Laachraoui to use explosives rather than guns after the cell lost its AK-47 ammunition following a raid on its safe house in the Forest district of Brussels. He also provided technical guidance on bomb making and received the attackers’ last wills.<sup>73</sup> Ultimately, however, the terrorists, needing to act fast before they were arrested, decided the targets and timing on their own.<sup>74</sup>

The role of Abu Ahmad/Osama Atar as coordinator and handler of returning foreign fighters has been confirmed by the investigation. His Turkish phone number was retrieved on a Stade de France suicide bomber. The same number was found in the cell phone of Adel Haddadi. Haddadi and Usman were in constant contact with Abu Ahmad during their trip to Europe through the encrypted Telegram messaging application, and Abu Ahmad was the one to whom they reported. After his arrest Haddadi told interrogators that Abu Ahmad had been responsible for their military training in Raqqa and that he provided them with false passports, communication devices, contacts with facilitators and smugglers, and money.<sup>75</sup> When Haddadi and Usman were unexpectedly detained by the Greek authorities, Abu Ahmad organized the transfer of additional funds to continue their trip.<sup>76</sup> So far, he is the only cadre of the Islamic State whose direct involvement in the planning of the Paris and Brussels attacks has been formally established and documented.

Another suspected leading figure in the Paris-Brussels attack network, Abu Suleyman al-Faransi, is considered by U.S. intelligence agencies to be one of the “conceivers” of the attacks. Indeed, he is described by U.S. intelligence as one of those involved in creating the infrastructure of the Islamic State’s external operations unit that ultimately reported to al-Adnani.<sup>77</sup>

Abu Suleyman has been identified<sup>78</sup> as Abdelilah Himich, a 26-year-old Moroccan national who lived in France for 10 years in Lunel—a town with a reputation as a jihadist recruiting ground—before leaving for Syria in February 2014, months after he was released from prison following a conviction for drug trafficking in April 2013.<sup>79</sup> After initially joining Jaysh Mohamed Ash Sham, a fighting unit founded by an Egyptian-Afghan veteran close to Jabhat al-Nusra and active in northeast Syria, he joined the Islamic State in April 2014. Despite lacking any longtime ties to jihadist networks, he was quickly promoted by the Islamic State. His rapid rise within the Islamic State could be explained by his military service in the French Foreign Legion for two years, during which he served in Afghanistan. Soon after joining the Islamic State he

became the emir of the Tarik Ibn Ziad brigade, a leading fighting brigade made up of 300 European foreign fighters. According to several French jihadis who had traveled and fought under his leadership, he also participated in Islamic State–filmed executions and crucifixions.<sup>80</sup>

Due to his background and combat experience, Himich is likely to have been considered as a key asset for the Islamic State, although the extent of his role in the conception and planning of the European attacks is still debated within the intelligence community.<sup>h</sup>

The genesis of the plots and attacks conceived and carried out by the Islamic State targeting Europe have usually involved several planners and organizers, who might vary for each project. In that regard, in the Paris and Brussels attacks, the intense communication and brainstorming activity deployed by the operatives, logisticians, ground coordinators, and their principals in Syria are evidence of a collaborative and team process rather than a single mastermind’s plan.

## The Future Threat

Following the Paris and Brussels attacks, the Islamic State’s threat to Europe has been mostly through sympathizers responding to the organization’s calls to hit the West, often encouraged or remotely controlled by its Syria-based core members. Fourteen such attacks have targeted Europe since the beginning of 2016.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, the Islamic State still has a very real capacity to mount centrally directed attacks against Europe. The organization has long contemplated such operations, and over the past two years, it has been increasingly invested in its external operations deployment and support networks, with a special focus on France and Belgium. The number of veterans from the Syrian battlefields being deployed to Europe and the apparent continued survival of senior francophone figures at the apex of the Islamic State’s external operations wing suggest that despite military efforts to deprive the Islamic State of territorial control in Iraq and Syria, the group will continue to be a threat to France, Belgium, and other European countries for some time to come. **CTC**

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# The Age of Selfie Jihad: How Evolving Media Technology is Changing Terrorism

By Jason Burke

**Extremists have sought to exploit the latest media technology to instill fear in target populations and elicit support from sympathetic audiences. In order to aid their recruitment, they adapt their tactics and strategy and structure their organizations accordingly. Recent rapid technological change that allows terrorists to reach a large audience quickly and directly has enabled them to achieve their messaging goals without launching large-scale attacks that demand significant physical infrastructure. Increasingly, thanks in part to the digital revolution, they can rely on what the Syrian jihadi strategist Abu Musab al-Suri called “individual terrorism.” With the Islamic State losing territory and the al-Qa`ida network increasingly decentralized, individuals and small autonomous cells may increasingly take the initiative in both the murderous and messaging dimensions of terrorism.**

**A**t around 9:00 PM on the evening of June 13 this year, a 25-year-old French extremist and petty criminal named Larossi Abballa killed Jean-Baptiste Salvaing, a senior local police official, in the latter's home in a residential neighborhood of Magnanville, a small town northwest of Paris. Larossi stabbed Salvaing seven times with a large knife. He used the same weapon to kill the dead policeman's wife. Leaving the couple's three-year-old son unharmed, Larossi then turned to his smartphone.<sup>1 a</sup>

Using Facebook's new live stream application, Facebook Live, the food delivery man broadcasted a rambling speech in Arabic and French that lasted 12 minutes. He spoke of his motives for the attack; pledged allegiance to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; called for further attacks in France against a range of targets,

a This article builds on a *Guardian* report by the author earlier this year. Jason Burke, “How Changing Media is Changing Terrorism,” *Guardian*, February 25, 2016.

*Jason Burke is a British journalist and author who has covered extremism, conflict, and political violence for more than 20 years, reporting from Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. His most recent book, The New Threat from Islamic Militancy, was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize. He is currently a senior foreign correspondent for The Guardian. Follow @burke\_jason*

*The author wishes to thank Paul Cruickshank for his significant editorial input.*

including prominent rappers, journalists, and politicians; and told those watching he was unsure of what to do with the traumatized child sitting a meter or so away from him.<sup>2</sup>

Larossi's use of Facebook was an entirely predictable step. Terrorists' quick exploitation of technological developments has been well documented, as has the impact that innovations in media has had on terrorist groups themselves.<sup>b</sup> But the advent of smart phones with high processing power, miniature video and camera devices, high speed data networks, and increasingly ubiquitous encryption have created, for the first time, the capability for individuals to communicate with large numbers of other people in real time. This has had potentially profound implications for the future of terrorism. This article charts the impact of changes in media technology on the way terrorist groups have organized their resources, tactics, and activities, and it looks at how the increasingly fast pace of technological change may impact terrorism in the future.

## Historical Background

If terrorism depends on creating fear among target populations and those populations are often of significant size, then some form of mass messaging is prerequisite for any terrorist strategy to succeed. It has often been noted that terrorism in its recognizably modern form emerged in the mid- to late 19th century alongside newspapers and other forms of dissemination capable of carrying the news of a given terrorist act to large numbers of people. It was also roughly contemporaneous with the development of the telegraph, allowing news of events to be relayed with unprecedented rapidity to audiences many thousands of miles away.<sup>3</sup> Several decades later, strategists belonging to national liberation movements during the peak years of violent struggle against colonial rulers in the decade or so following World War II were quick to recognize the potential of television and to adjust their strategies to exploit this powerful, new mode of communication. In the 1970s, further technological developments were a factor in the surge of spectacular violence during that decade.<sup>4</sup> One of these was the ability to send images live from an overseas location. Like the telegraph almost 100 years earlier, this brought a new immediacy to reports of very distant events, which terrorists were fast to exploit.<sup>c</sup>

Not all groups were able to gain from these developments, however. Achieving greater publicity depended on the ability to meet a

b The relationship between the media and terrorism has been explored in seminal works such as Bruce Hoffman's *Inside Terrorism* and Paul Wilkington's *The Media and Terrorism: A Reassessment*. A production of Joseph Conrad's classic novel *The Secret Agent*, which examines terrorism in the U.K. in the first decade of the 20th century, prompted considerable debate in the U.K. on this crucial topic this summer.

c Others included new lightweight video cameras, portable video recorders, and technology, which allowed video footage to be transmitted from a location to a studio or broadcast direct. Hoffman, pp. 178-179.

threshold set by officials or news professionals who controlled the content of news bulletins or front pages. It was extremely difficult for terrorists to influence this reality with the limited means at their disposal. For most groups active during this period, the only means of production and dissemination of “content,” remained leaflets or even graffiti. Even as late as the mid-1990s, Islamist militant propaganda produced by Algerian groups circulated in the U.K. consisted primarily of audio cassettes, a form of dissemination used in the Middle East since the 1980s. Only those groups with significant existing capabilities, or the possibility of acquiring them, were able to execute the kind of spectacular attack that would be guaranteed to capture the attention of the mainstream media in their target countries. The IRA was a clear example. The PFLP, which was behind the 1970 Dawson’s Field hijackings, and Black September, which was responsible for the attack on Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, were both able to take advantage of substantial infrastructure such as training camps.<sup>d</sup>

Al-Qa`ida was founded in 1988. Though his objectives and interests remained fairly constant from the early to mid-1990s, Usama bin Ladin’s media strategy took nearly a decade to mature. While in his native Saudi Arabia and then in exile in Sudan, bin Ladin had largely relied on print and audio cassettes to disseminate his ideas. Soon after shifting to Afghanistan in 1996, he appears to have become much more interested in television. His arrival had coincided with the maturing of satellite broadcasting, which was transforming the media landscape of the Middle East and beyond. Bin Ladin recognized the advantages of satellite networks to broadcast material, which would previously have been kept off air by states long able to control what their populations watched, in local languages.

The best-known satellite network example was Qatar-based Al Jazeera, set up in 1996, but there were also other outlets that enabled the leader of al-Qa`ida, though based in remote Afghanistan, to reach an audience of hundreds of millions, which would have otherwise been impossible. English-language networks also played a role, albeit a less significant one. In 1997, bin Ladin was interviewed by CNN for example. Anyone with a decoder and a dish anywhere in the world would have been able to see and hear him. By the early 2000s, few corners of the Islamic world—even tightly controlled authoritarian states—were beyond the reach of satellite TV.<sup>e</sup> Though illegal in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, dishes and decoders were sufficiently widespread for large numbers of people to watch the invasion of 2003 in real time.<sup>f</sup>

By the mid- to late 1990s, the campaign against “the Far Enemy” of the West had become al-Qa`ida’s major purpose. This had three linked goals: to force a physical, financial, and diplomatic withdrawal by the United States from the Middle East; to precipitate the fall of hated “apostate” regimes there; and to prompt the formation of a new cohort of supporters. It was a mission statement they wanted to be heard by the U.S. government, Muslims around the world, and the broader population in Western countries.

Many factors determined the structure and organization of al-Qa`ida, but the desire to execute major, spectacular terrorist attacks that would attract global media attention for their message was arguably central.<sup>g</sup> To achieve this, bin Ladin needed to launch operations that the new media gatekeepers—executives at satellite networks around the world—could not ignore.<sup>h</sup> In Afghanistan, al-Qa`ida built, or appropriated, a training structure that provided this capability. The best recruits in basic boot camps, often run by local groups or factions, were funneled into a smaller number of camps run by al-Qa`ida where they were taught advanced techniques. This provided the capacity for the escalating series of attacks executed by the group between 1998 and 2001, which can be seen as progressively more ambitious attempts to capture the world’s attention. The structure al-Qa`ida was forced to adopt to execute these strikes, however, was cumbersome, expensive, and as was shown in the weeks after 9/11, vulnerable.

## The Digital Revolution

The next decade saw a dramatic evolution of media technology. Islamist militant groups everywhere adapted their strategies and their structures as a result. The changes were neither linear nor uniform.

Until around 2004, the internet played a minor role in Islamist militancy, limited largely to providing forums for discussions and communication between a small number of people. If there were some well-known websites, these had limited reach and faced a variety of significant logistic issues, such as download times and access. Images of Daniel Pearl’s murder in Pakistan in 2002 first circulated on a video cassette before being uploaded to a militant-linked website. As far as can be ascertained, they were viewed by very few people in either format, and no satellite network existed that would broadcast them. Even in Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, the production and dissemination of most propaganda remained reliant on familiar methods. When makeshift studios set up by terrorists were raided in Fallujah in 2004, dozens of video recorders were seized.<sup>5</sup> Though the introduction of small, affordable digital cameras made obtaining combat footage much easier, such material was usually burned onto CDs/DVDs and then physically distributed or transmitted to locations outside Iraq where the infrastructure necessary for broadcast existed.<sup>6</sup>

The next phase of the evolution—or revolution—saw distribution networks digitized. A turning point came when the images of the execution of U.S. contractor Nick Berg by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in

d The PFLP and Black September were also aided by connections to European leftist groups and received assistance from Soviet, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern states. John Follain, *Jackal: the complete story of the legendary terrorist, Carlos the Jackal* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1998), pp. 27-28; Christopher Andrew, *The Mitrokhin Archive II* (New York: Penguin), chapter 12; Jeffrey Herf, *Undeclared Wars with Israel: East Germany and the West German Far Left, 1967-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 29, 354, 356; Dan Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 133, 140.

e Bin Ladin was far from the only Islamist extremist keen to exploit the new technology. Lebanon-based Hezbollah launched its own satellite channel, Al-Manar, in 2001. Author’s reporting, interviews with Hezbollah and al-Manar, Beirut, 2005.

f This is, as far as the author knows, the first time that the population of a country had actually watched an invasion while it happened.

g The group’s commitment to fighting in Afghanistan alongside the Taliban was tactical, born of a desire to maintain good relations with their hosts. Attempts to aid other extremist factions fighting elsewhere continued, though sporadically.

h Though bin Ladin cultivated a relationship with Al Jazeera, he was frustrated by the lack of interest of its editors in the content of the many video tapes delivered by courier to its bureau in Pakistan or headquarters in Qatar. Author interview with one such courier, Pakistan, October 2001.

May 2004 were posted on a militant website. The exact number of downloads is unknown, but its wide dissemination on jihadist websites, and the “buzz” it created on extremist online forums, suggests this footage reached a much greater audience than any comparable material. Even this was a limited reach compared to what was to come, especially in the Middle East where internet access remained restricted and bandwidths extremely narrow.

Al-Zarqawi, or perhaps one of his associates, realized that extremists no longer had to make content that appealed to news editors in distant offices, or would at least not repel them. They could create their own productions, designed to speak directly to the specific people they wanted to speak to, and then broadcast them via the internet. Although al-Zarqawi built up a significant infrastructure to wage an insurgent and terrorist campaign inside Iraq, he did not set up the sort of training camps al-Qa`ida set up in Afghanistan to carry out spectacular international attacks. This was because his focus was much more on the “near enemy,” and because the security environment in Iraq was very different from that in Afghanistan pre-2001, but it was also because his ability to directly get his message out meant there was no need to carry out international spectacles to reach his target audience.

It was another jihadi, Abu Musab al-Suri, who more fully grasped the future possible implications of the new technology. Not only did he practically exploit its capabilities, by publishing his seminal work “A Call to a Global Islamic Resistance” in late 2004 online, but he repeatedly referred in the text to the importance of the internet as a resource for jihadis.<sup>7</sup>

Though complex, al-Suri’s text is best known for its doctrine of “nizam, la tanzim,” which roughly translates as ‘system not organization’ and has been dubbed “leaderless jihad” by analysts.<sup>8</sup> Al-Suri also himself branded it “individual terrorism.”<sup>9</sup> This vision of independent actors executing their own individual elements of the collective Islamist extremist endeavor was not an entirely new idea, but al-Suri provided one of the most articulate and elaborate codifications of this strategy and the first one that explicitly stressed the internet as a means of relaying advice and orientation.

The force of circumstance played a significant role in the development of his new strategic doctrine: the need to make terrorist groups more resilient in the face of intense international counterterrorism efforts, especially U.S. military power in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

However, al-Suri’s writings indicate that he also grasped that changes in media technology meant that terrorists could adapt in the future by foregoing much of their infrastructure and still succeed in their messaging aims. By implication, the vulnerable training camps bin Ladin had set up at a large expense in order to carry out spectacular terrorist attacks, as well as al-Qa`ida’s centralized and hierarchical structures, were no longer as necessary. “Muslim

homes,” al Suri wrote, “should become both the new training camps and forward bases.”<sup>9</sup>

So that this decentralized movement would succeed in its messaging aims, he called for the creation of “covert incitement detachments” that he envisaged working alongside operational cells to get the jihadist message out “via covert means of broadcasting, especially through the internet.” These detachments, al-Suri wrote, should be made up of individuals with significant knowledge of religious law, politics, ideology, as well as media experience and experience in using the Internet.<sup>10</sup>

Yet even al-Suri did not foresee what was to come next. Phase three of the digital revolution saw a rush of deep and lasting changes. One was miniaturization, with cameras becoming so small that they could be inserted into telephones. The power of such devices was first truly demonstrated by the impact of clandestinely filmed images of the execution of Saddam Hussein in 2006.<sup>11</sup> These clips altered the perception of this key event across the Middle East, dramatically disrupting the narrative that U.S. and Iraqi government officials sought to project and underscoring how difficult it had become for states to manage information. Over the following years, devices capable of capturing broadcast-quality footage became even smaller, cheaper, and lighter.

MMS,<sup>j</sup> SMS, and email also became cheaper and easier to use across the Islamic world and beyond. The introduction of smartphones coupled with the spread of Twitter, Facebook and other social media, allowing massive and almost instantaneous broadcast of content was a further major step. Once more, all terrorist groups began using the new technology—though, again, in different ways.

One of the most successful such propagandists of recent years, Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni-American cleric linked to many attacks in the West, was swift to recognize the potential of YouTube, a video-sharing platform established in 2005. A 2009 British government analysis found 1,910 videos of al-Awlaki on YouTube, one of which had been viewed 164,420 times.<sup>12</sup> As before, the new technology often complemented older means of dissemination. In India-controlled parts of Kashmir in 2013, for example, CDs of al-Awlaki’s lectures were popular among taxi drivers. So too, for those with suitably equipped vehicles, were MP3 files.<sup>13</sup>

The Taliban started to use Twitter, launched in 2006, in early 2011.<sup>14</sup> Al-Shabaab in Somalia was active on the platform only a few months later. The group attracted thousands of followers. Twitter gave individual members the ability to broadcast propaganda but also to voice grievances during internal power struggles. During its September 2013 attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, al-Shabaab justified the attack and gave details of ongoing operations in real time.<sup>15 k</sup>

Just as influential was Facebook, which had a million users in 2004 but 750 million by the time of the Arab uprisings of 2011.<sup>16</sup> In a revealing comment shortly after the uprising in Egypt that deposed Hosni Mubarak in that year—a long-term aim of al-Qa`ida and a host of other extremists—a veteran of Egyptian militant

i Abu Musab al Suri’s book elaborated on ideas he taught in training camps in Afghanistan before 9/11. Videotapes from the summer 2000 show him telling a class, “We ask the Muslim youth to be a terrorist. Why do we ask for such individual terrorism? First because secret hierarchical organizations failed to attract Muslims. The youth fear joining such an organization because if there is a mistake, then the authorities will reach them. Second because we need to give the youth the chance to play a role without being part of an organization. Some youth don’t want to join an organization and don’t know how to act on their beliefs.” See Paul Cruickshank and Mohamad Hage Ali, “Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30:1 (2007): pp. 1-14.

j MMS, or Multimedia Messaging Service, is a way to send messages with multimedia content between cell phones.

k Omar Hammami, also known as Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, was a U.S.-born recruit who, slightly ahead of his time, effectively live tweeted an attack on his life in late 2013. David Smith, “US ‘jihadist rapper’ claims to have survived attempt on life by al-Shabaab,” *Guardian*, April 26, 2013.



activism Aboud al-Zomor, told a journalist that if Facebook had existed 30 years earlier, there would have been no need to assassinate President Anwar Sadat. Instead of trying to use spectacular violence against a high-profile target, an extraordinarily risky and ambitious enterprise for any extremist organization, to prompt a general uprising and overturn a regime, it seemed the same goal could be achieved through the networking of individuals via social media.<sup>17</sup>

In 2014 the then-Islamic State of Iraq made use of MMS during framing operations before launching its successful, 'surprise' offensive against Mosul, sending images of executions and abductions of comrades to Iraqi Army officers in a successful effort to undermine morale.<sup>18</sup> It also launched a hashtag on Twitter, #AllEyesOnISIS, as the campaign got underway.<sup>19</sup>

The combination of digital cameras; cheap laptops and editing software; and social media has subsequently been systematically and massively exploited by the Islamic State and its sympathizers both inside and outside the regions it controls in well-documented ways. A detailed examination is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that the group has invested very significant resources into its propaganda and made the production and dissemination of content a key strategic function. The Islamic State has consciously choreographed violence in the areas it controls to meet the demands of its key audiences, and it has carefully exploited the capabilities of contemporary media technology to deliver that content, often via social media but also via other means. Many of the practices of the Islamic State have been replicated both by its various affiliated organizations, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, and by competing groups in areas they control.

### Jihadist Millennials

A new generation of tech savvy jihadi millennials are starting to exploit the full potential of advancing media technologies. One very important part of this new phase has been new technology such as GoPro cameras—originally designed for use by extreme athletes—which allows a single individual to film point-of-view images, produce, and broadcast content. The gradual exploitation by attackers of the full capabilities of such equipment when combined with smartphones and fast internet was seen in France in recent years. Mohammed Merah, a 24-year-old French-Algerian who killed seven in a 10-day shooting spree in 2012 in southwest France, filmed his own attacks with a GoPro camera and edited a lengthy clip from the material he had obtained. However, he reverted to traditional "mainstream" media when it came to delivery and dissemination of that content, sending it on a USB key to Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based TV network, which refrained from broadcasting it.<sup>21</sup> Amedy Coulibaly, 32, who attacked a kosher supermarket in Paris in 2015, captured images with a GoPro camera and then uploaded them to a laptop while holding hostages. He attempted to email them to a contact, but the images were never broadcast, and it is unclear what became of them.<sup>22</sup> As outlined above, Larossi Abballa, the 25-year-old Magnanville attacker, used a live feed to address his audience from the scene of his attack.<sup>1</sup>



*Magnanville killer Larossi Abballa in his Facebook Live video*

The next step, which now appears inevitable, is a live stream from a GoPro or other camera of an actual killing. The technology now exists, with the use of a range of live-streaming apps such as Periscope, Twitch, and Facebook Live expanding rapidly over the last 18 months.<sup>23</sup> Already, these apps have allowed a French woman to live-stream her suicide and a teenager in the United States to broadcast her friend's rape.<sup>24</sup> In August 2015, a journalist and a cameraman were shot dead by a colleague during a live broadcast of a television interview in Moneta, Virginia. Though the local CBS affiliate cut the broadcast feed, the killer Vester Flanagan had used a GoPro camera to capture point-of-view images of the attack and then posted a 56-second video on social media. Both Twitter and Facebook quickly removed Flanagan's profile—the former within eight minutes of the footage being posted—but the event received global attention. Newspapers around the world featured images of the killings from Flanagan's own footage on their front pages. And Flanagan's tweet—"I filmed the shooting see Facebook"—was rapidly and widely disseminated by social media users.<sup>25</sup>

A further development is more extensive, effective, and available encryption. The Islamic State has made Telegram, a free messaging application, one of its main outlets for propaganda and for claims of responsibility for operations.<sup>26</sup> In the week following the Paris attacks of November last year, Telegram said it had shut down 78 "ISIS-related channels."<sup>27</sup> Such channels are, however, public. Groups, of up to 200 members, and supergroups, of up to 5000, on Telegram are not. Chat facilities are heavily encrypted, and messages can be set to self-destruct.<sup>28</sup>

Encrypted Messaging channels such as Telegram have provided the Islamic State and other terrorist groups with a powerful new operational tool to instigate, plan, coordinate, and broadcast attacks. French investigators believe that Rachid Kassim, a 29-year-old alleged French Islamic State member currently believed to be in Syria or Iraq, used the Telegram application not only to circulate a list of targets and attack scenarios to some 300 contacts within France,<sup>29</sup> but also to privately reach out to extremists and unite radicalized

<sup>1</sup> Tech companies face formidable difficulties to counter such acts. The video was finally suspended around 11 hours after the live-stream was initially broadcast, according to *The Washington Post*. Caitlin Dewey and Sarah Parnass, "For the first time, an alleged terrorist has broadcast a confession in real time on Facebook Live," *Washington Post*, June 14, 2016.

individuals who lived far apart and may not have known one another to form operational cells. Kassim is believed to have brought together the two men who killed a priest in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, Normandy, in July 2016, as well as the female cell accused of plotting to use a car filled with gas canisters as an explosive device near Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral.<sup>30</sup> Among Kassim's contacts was Larossi Abballa, who killed the police couple in Magnanville. Private electronic exchanges between them obtained by French security services reveal that the 12-minute speech Larossi broadcasted via Facebook Live was heavily influenced by Kassim.<sup>31</sup> Other groups such as al-Shabaab have also adopted Telegram to claim responsibility for attacks.<sup>m</sup> These days the self-destruct option available on Telegram has been added to most chat apps, while end-to-end encryption protocols are becoming near universal.<sup>32</sup> Encryption apps allow extremists not only to communicate securely with terrorist groups but also to securely upload footage of their attacks.

One of the killers of the priest in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, Adel Kermiche, was particularly active on the Telegram messaging app. In the weeks before the attack, he broadcasted a series of audio messages to 200 extremists via his private Telegram channel recounting his failed attempt to travel from France to join the Islamic State in Syria. He also signaled he was intending to carry out a knife attack in a church. The day before the attack he told his followers that they would soon need to rebroadcast content that he was going to post. "I'll tell you in advance, three or four minutes before, and when the thing happens, you'll need to share it live." The next morning around 90 minutes before launching the attack, he told followers to "share what will follow." He then again accessed the application just minutes before entering the church. After killing the priest, he and his accomplice forced a hostage to record the aftermath of the attack on one of their cell phones, even checking on the quality of the images, but they were killed by French commandos during the hostage siege before it seems they had a chance to upload the footage. However, before the attack, they managed to send out a video they had previously recorded video pledging allegiance to the Islamic State, which was rebroadcast by the Islamic State-affiliated Amaq news agency. In an extraordinary twist a week after the attack, new messages were posted on Kermiche's private Telegram channel, including an audio message by a French-speaking extremist who presented himself as based in a jihadist battleground overseas. In the tape, the mystery extremist, who presumably was provided Kermiche's account details before he was killed, congratulated the church attackers and the Magnanville killer Larossi Abballa.<sup>33</sup>

Other operatives may have planned to live broadcast attacks. In the early hours of November 20 an alleged Islamic State network which French investigators say were plotting attacks in France was arrested by French police in Strasbourg and Marseilles. In the hours before their arrest two of the conspirators downloaded "Periscope" to their smart phones, a Twitter app that allows users to broadcast live video, establishing "the imminence," according to the Paris prosecutor, of their planned attack.<sup>34</sup>

It is entirely possible that, at some stage in the not too distant future, there will be an encrypted live stream of an attack sent to followers of a particular channel. The encrypted nature of the communication means, however, that it would only initially reach those who were already part of, or close to, an extremist network, but they could be downloaded and rebroadcasted by terrorist groups like the Amaq news agency did for Abballa's Facebook Live.<sup>n</sup>

### More Individual Jihad

The cumulative effect of all these various technological innovations is to make smaller attacks by individuals or very small groups more attractive to terrorist organizations than ever before.

With the exception of attacks in Paris and Brussels, most of the attacks by the Islamic State in the West have involved the group inspiring or instigating small scale acts of terror. Although the Islamic State created an external operations division dedicated to launching international attacks, the group so far has not put a large fraction of its resources into this unit.<sup>35</sup> No evidence has so far come to the light that the group has set up training camps, like al-Qa'ida did in Afghanistan, exclusively dedicated to attacking the West. While the decision to dedicate only limited resources to international attacks has reflected the Islamic State's focus on maintaining and defending its so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq, it also reflects how evolving media technology has offered the organization an alternative to costly, complex, spectacular attacks that were once the only way terrorists could achieve their messaging aims. In the months since the March 2016 Brussels attacks, sympathizers in France and Germany have launched a series of attacks and attempted attacks using what they have branded as Islamic State operations using media tools.<sup>36</sup> Cumulatively, these have been effective in keeping the Islamic State in the headlines, exacerbating communal tensions in Europe and elsewhere in the West, and, to some extent, obscuring the growing weakness of the organization.

In this era of Islamic State terror, social media and encryption are making al-Suri's vision of individual terrorism a reality. There has been a steady rise in the number of lone-actor operations over the last decade,<sup>37</sup> a trend which has coincided with the deepening and broadening of the digital revolution as well as the encouragement of such operations by terrorist groups because intensified counterterrorism operations have disrupted their ability to launch larger plots. Lone actors now have much greater capability to create and broadcast material than they did a decade ago, while extremist groups can contact and interact with potential recruits with much greater ease. This has made it easier for "individual" terrorists from

m In October, the Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab used Telegram to claim responsibility for a car bombing in Mogadishu, clearly believing that sufficient members of its group would act as relayers for the message to reach a broader audience. Harun Maruf, "Al-Shabab Bomb Attack Hits Mogadishu Restaurant," VOA, October 2016.

n The Facebook Live posted by Magnanville attacker Larossi Abballa was available to those following his Facebook page. One of those was the French journalist David Thomson who was the first to report on the video. The footage was downloaded by Islamic State sympathizers and an edited version of the recording was subsequently released via the affiliated Amaq news agency. See Amar Toor, "French terror suspect reportedly streamed attack on Facebook Live," The Verge, June 14, 2016; and Tim Hume, Lindsay Isaac, and Paul Cruickshank, "French terror attacker threatened Euro 2016 in Facebook video, source says," CNN, June 14, 2016.

Copenhagen to San Bernardino to Bavaria<sup>9</sup> to claim carrying out their attack on behalf of a particular terrorist group, something that both the Islamic State in its propaganda magazines and Abu Musab al-Suri, many years ago, have stressed as vital. For individual terrorism to be “orderly,” “wonderful individual initiatives” needed to be “invested” with “a state of general unity,” the Syrian had argued in “Call to a Global Islamic Resistance.”<sup>38</sup>

Terrorist communication now takes place through multiple channels to maximize the impact of a given attack. The echo chamber of social media can be relied on to do the rest. Indeed, if the aim of terrorism is to create fear, then so-called “lone actors” are peculiarly effective, underscoring the ordinary citizen’s sense that the threat to them is ubiquitous and unstoppable. A series of attacks

by individuals can thus create a generalized sense of panic, which almost rivals that prompted by some larger attacks like the recent attacks in Paris and Brussels, but for a fraction of the investment.

### What Lies Ahead

With al-Qa’ida increasingly becoming a coalition of loosely connected local groups united only by nominal allegiance to a weak central leadership, and as the Islamic State loses yet more of its territorial base, a new Islamic extremist landscape is emerging. As the latter group loses access to territory in Syria and Iraq and the capability to recruit, train, and direct foreign fighters, it is likely to rely more on “individual terrorism” by actors acting on behalf of the group by their own initiative. Whether these actors are foreign fighters who have migrated back home or to new fronts or whether they are extremists who never traveled to join the group, a “post-caliphate” generation of jihadis will likely take advantage of new media technologies to amplify the impact of their attacks. The new landscape will be one with few formal boundaries or solid structures, where groups can form wherever resources permit and circumstances are favorable. It is also one in which technology may permit active militants in the future to become individual terror broadcasting units, cataloging their path to terror and teaching others their tradecraft. **CTC**

- o The terrorists who attacked Copenhagen in February 2015 and the terrorist couple who attacked San Bernardino in December 2015 pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi via Facebook. The terrorist who attacked passengers on a train in Bavaria in July 2016 claimed responsibility in a video file transferred to the Islamic State-affiliated Amaq news agency. See “Denmark terror suspect swore fidelity to ISIS leader on Facebook page,” CNN, February 23, 2015; “San Bernardino shooting investigated as ‘act of terrorism,’” CNN, December 5, 2015; “IS’ ‘Amaq News Agency Releases Video of Alleged Wuerzburg Attacker Identifying as ‘Soldier of the Caliphate,’” SITE Intelligence Group, July 19, 2016.

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# The Consequences of Russia's 'Counterterrorism' Campaign in Syria

By Brian Glyn Williams and Robert Souza

**Under the guise of joining the U.S.-led war against the Islamic State, Russian President Vladimir Putin intervened militarily in Syria in September 2015 by launching what the Russian media dubbed Operation Vozmezdie (Retribution). But his real aim was to bolster the beleaguered Bashar al-Assad regime in the western corridor where most Syrians live. Russian forces have deployed advanced tanks and aircraft to repulse an alliance of Sunni rebels that was advancing on the coastal strongholds of the Alawite-dominated Assad regime. But in so doing, Moscow incurred the wrath of Sunni jihadist groups, including the Islamic State, even though the vast majority of Russia's bombings have not targeted the group. As a result, Russia has increasingly been made a primary target of global jihad with a rising number of Islamist terrorist plots and attacks focusing on Russian targets at home and overseas. With thousands of foreign fighters from the former Soviet bloc in Syria and Iraq, there is significant risk this terrorist blowback will get much worse.**

**R**ussia has been involved in the war in Syria for just over a year now, and the basic contours of the Kremlin's campaign on the ground in that country and its effect on the protection of Russians from what President Vladimir Putin describes as "criminals who already tasted blood" have finally become clear.<sup>1</sup> It can now be seen that Russia's stated objectives are at odds with, and even contradicted by, its military actions in Syria.

At the outset of Putin's intervention on behalf of Russia's long-time ally, the embattled Bashar al-Assad regime, Russia's then-chief of staff of the Presidential Executive Office, Sergei Ivanov, laid out Moscow's official objectives, stating on September 30, 2015, that "the military goal of the operation is strictly to provide air support for the [Syrian] government forces in their fight against Islamic

State."<sup>2</sup> It soon became widely apparent, however, that the Russians had conflated the Islamic State with U.S.-backed rebels and various other anti-Assad Sunni rebel forces in Syria with no known connection to the Islamic State. This allowed for the creation of the false narrative that a united terrorist monolith needed to be eradicated in order to preserve stability in Syria and protect Russians back home. In the process of waging war on this seemingly massive block of "terrorist" rebels, Putin was able to shift the sands of the conflict.<sup>3</sup> He did so by bolstering the endangered Assad regime while simultaneously cultivating his image domestically as a strong leader who was able to protect the Russian people from terrorists based in Syria and project power abroad. In Russia, the ongoing operation has been portrayed as an unmitigated success in "inflicting heavy losses on Syrian terrorist groups" and even making Russia safer.<sup>4</sup> But has it really been a successful counterterrorism operation?

There is now evidence that Putin's intervention in Syria never was a counterterrorism operation. It was instead designed to be a counterinsurgency campaign against anti-Assad Sunni rebels. And far from making his citizens safe, Putin's efforts have put them squarely in the crosshairs of the Islamic State and the al-Qa`ida-aligned Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra). There is clear evidence also that the terrorist blowback against Russia is escalating. As recently as November 13, 2016, Russian police disrupted at the last minute a plot to punish the Russian leader by carrying out a "Paris-style" massacre of civilians in shopping centers in Moscow and St. Petersburg by terrorists from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>5</sup> This Islamic State-inspired mass casualty plot was only the latest in a string of plots and attacks in Russia carried out by terrorists who have answered the calls to punish the "new eastern Crusaders" in Moscow.<sup>6</sup>

There have been few efforts to outline the successes and failures of Putin's Syrian campaign. Drawing on Russian news sources and official statements, this article attempts to historicize the first year of the campaign with the aim of assessing both its proclaimed success as a counterinsurgency operation and its unintended role as catalyst for retribution against Russians at home and abroad.

## Prelude to an Intervention

Moscow has long been an ally of the Syrian Baathist-Socialist regime led by President Assad. Hafez al-Assad, the current president's father and predecessor, came to rule Syria by seizing control in a coup in 1970 and putting his ethnic-religious group, the Alawites, in power.<sup>a</sup> Assad then created an authoritarian regime dominated by Alawites who kept the restless Sunni majority in check and brutally suppressed Sunni rebellions.<sup>7</sup>

In 1971, Assad provided the Soviet Union with a naval facility

*Brian Glyn Williams is Professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and author of Counter-Jihad: The American Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. He previously worked for the CIA's Counterterrorism Center in Afghanistan and for the U.S. Army's information operations in Kabul. Follow @BrianGlynWilliams*

*Robert Souza is a research analyst for the Center for the Study of Targeted Killing at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and an assistant managing editor at Young Professionals in Foreign Policy, Washington, D.C.*

a The Alawites, who make up 15 percent of Syria's population, adhere to a syncretic faith often seen as an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

at Tartus, located on Syria's Mediterranean coast. Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the naval facility—referred to by the Russians as a Material Technical Support Point—remains there today and is Russia's sole remaining military facility outside of the former Soviet Union. As the threat mounted in 2015 to current President Assad by a powerful alliance of non-Islamic State Sunni rebel groups in northwest Syria dominated by the Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), concern grew in Moscow over possible threats to this rather basic facility.

To prevent the loss of this facility and the further spread of chaos in Syria, Putin decided to stand by his ally, Assad, when the civil war broke out between the ruling Alawites and an array of Sunni rebel groups. It would seem that the Russian-Assad alliance perceived the Jaish al-Fatah alliance that was advancing on the Alawite coastal homeland in the west as the greatest threat to their joint interests.<sup>8</sup> Putin decided he needed to protect Moscow's facility at Tartus and strengthen the Assad regime *vis a vis* what he described as "the units of international terrorists and their ilk [that] have no desire to negotiate."<sup>9</sup> He lumped all anti-Assad Sunni rebel groups into this category alongside the Islamic State and then-Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>10</sup>

On August 26, 2015, a formal agreement was signed in the Syrian capital of Damascus that granted Russia access to the Syrian air base known as Hmeimim, in the regime-controlled stronghold of southern Latakia.<sup>11</sup>

## The Russian Intervention

In early September 2015, Russia deployed advanced T-90 "Vladimir" main battle tanks to be manned by Syrian soldiers and flew in approximately 2,000 Russian military personnel to the Hmeimim base. Most importantly, the Russians also dispatched approximately 50 fighters and bombers (primarily new Su-34 Fullback medium bombers, Su-25 Frogfoot ground attack planes, and Su-24 Fencer fighter jets) and several Mil Mi-24 Hind attack helicopters to the base.<sup>12</sup>

Then on September 30, 2015, in a move that caught the United States and its allies by surprise, the Russians began an intense bombing campaign, which informally became known as Operation Vozmezdie (Retribution) against what they claimed were Islamic State targets in Syria. But despite Putin's statements about joining the U.S.-led coalition's fight to destroy the Islamic State, whose territory laid primarily in the east, the initial Russian strikes appeared to be against Jaish al-Fatah in Idlib Province located in northwestern Syria.<sup>13</sup> U.S.-backed Sunni rebels in the region claimed that the Russian attacks had been more destructive than anything they had previously experienced at the hands of the Syrian Air Force.<sup>14</sup> With Putin conflating all Sunni rebel groups with the Islamic State, the conflict in Syria risked taking on an extra dimension as a proxy war between Russia and the United States.

In October 2015, the U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) initially fought ferociously against a Russia-backed Syrian army ground offensive in the northwest using U.S.-supplied TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided missiles) to destroy Russian-built Syrian tanks. But the Russians adjusted and began using Mil Mi-24 Hind attack helicopters, which could not be brought down by TOW missiles.<sup>15</sup> The FSA Sunni rebels, who were forced to retreat, requested anti-aircraft missiles to shoot down Russian and Syrian jets and attack helicopters, but the United States was allegedly reluctant to deliver them for fear they might fall into the hands of extremists.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the previously advancing Sun-

ni rebels were forced on the defensive and began to retreat from northern Latakia, significant areas of which they had held for three years, and from parts of Idlib.<sup>17</sup>

On October 1, 2015, Putin announced that he had arranged an intelligence-sharing agreement with Iran, Iraq, and Syria, bolstering the demoralized Syrian regime.<sup>18</sup> On October 3, 2015, Hezbollah and Iran expanded their roles in the conflict by deploying fighters to the Hama and Homs provinces in western Syria—two strategically important locations that augmented the defenses of Assad's strongholds along the coast—in order to prepare major ground offensives backed by Russian airstrikes.<sup>19</sup> On October 7, pro-Assad forces from Iran and Hezbollah carried out their first major coordinated ground assaults on Sunni rebels in western Syria under the cover of Russian warplanes.<sup>20</sup> The same day, Russia also stepped up its bombing campaign by firing 26 new Kalibr cruise missiles at Sunni rebel targets in Aleppo, Idlib, and Raqqa from warships 900 miles away in the Caspian Sea.<sup>21</sup>

By mid-October 2015, with the assistance of his Russian, Hezbollah, and Iranian allies, Assad's forces began to stabilize their position and regain lost territory. By this time, it had become clear to observers that the vast majority of Russian bombings were in the northwest against the Jaish al-Fatah alliance of Sunni rebel groups and its allies who were threatening the Assad regime from territories they had recently conquered in the northwestern province of Idlib.<sup>22</sup> The White House quickly made clear that it rejected Putin's narrative that he was waging a counterterrorism war in Syria.<sup>23</sup>

Undeterred by criticism from Washington, Russia launched air attacks on the Sunni rebels in Hama and Homs Province to the south of Idlib.<sup>24</sup> In November, the Russian Ministry of Defense described one large-scale bombing of this region by a squadron of strategic bombers making the long flight to Syria from southern Russia. "During a massive airstrike today, 14 important ISIL [Islamic State] targets were destroyed by 34 air-launched cruise missiles. The targets destroyed include command posts that were used to coordinate ISIL activities in the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo, munition and supply depots in the northwestern part of Syria."<sup>25</sup>

There was, however, one problem with this statement: the Islamic State did not have forces in Idlib or the areas of Aleppo that were targeted in the November air attack.<sup>26</sup> Among the Russian targets in this northwestern region were actually several U.S.-backed Sunni groups in the rebel alliance, such as the Free Syrian Army, Sham Legion, Jund al Aqsa, Jaish al Sunna, Ahrar ash Sham, and Division 13.<sup>27</sup>

To support the Kremlin's narrative that it was conducting pinpoint strikes against the Islamic State, the Russian Ministry of Defense released YouTube videos of several airstrikes purportedly against the Islamic State.<sup>28</sup> But the videos were subsequently scrutinized by investigative journalists using a collaborative verification platform to match the locations seen in the YouTube videos with satellite images from the air, as well as ground level photographs. Using this process, the journalists established that Moscow's claims contained numerous elements of Soviet-style *dezinformatsiia* (disinformation).<sup>29</sup> Most of the targeted areas identified were without a known Islamic State presence, thus confirming what many had already suspected—that Russia was primarily bombing Sunni rebel groups with no known connection to the Islamic State under the guise of joining the war on terrorism.<sup>30</sup>

One of the groups targeted by Russia in the northwest was Jabhat al-Nusra, which had been declared a foreign terrorist orga-



nization by the U.S. State Department<sup>31</sup> and was linked by American intelligence officials to the so-called “Khorasan group,” a cell of al-Qa`ida veterans who were said to be developing capabilities to launch international attacks in 2014.<sup>32</sup> Muddying the waters, the group was allied with several moderate Sunni groups that considered it to be an effective, local, Syrian-dominated fighting force against Assad in the northwest.<sup>b</sup> But the U.S. designation provided Putin with ammunition for his claims that his forces were engaged in a counterterrorism campaign.

Seemingly undeterred by mounting criticism of its air campaign by Western leaders who were alarmed by its high civilian death toll,<sup>33</sup> Russia in early December 2015 began preparations to expand operations by opening a second major airbase in Syria at al-Shayrat airbase near Homs.<sup>34</sup> The base was bolstered by military personnel, increasing the number of Russian troops in Syria from an initial

2,000 to roughly 4,000.<sup>c</sup>

Meanwhile, the Russian campaign accelerated despite protests from human rights groups. But for all the toll the Russian air campaign indisputably took on civilians, it also allowed Assad government troops to clear Sunni rebels out of the Alawite homeland of Latakia. In February 2016, Russian aircraft continued with their momentum and supported Assad regime troops and allied Hezbollah and Iranian fighters in encircling neighborhoods of eastern Aleppo that had been controlled by Sunni rebels since 2012.<sup>35</sup> In the process, the revived Assad regime forces were able to cut off the rebels' supply lines to the Turkish border at Bab al Salameh in their most successful offensive of the war.<sup>36</sup> This decisive offensive also broke a three-year siege of several pro-government neighborhoods in the area and caused a mass, panicked flight of Sunni refugees to Turkey.<sup>37</sup> As the Russian and Syrian air forces indiscriminately bombed rebel-held areas causing hundreds of civilian casualties, the Syrian Army starved rebel-controlled neighborhoods in an at-

b The Islamic State, by contrast, was dominated by foreigners and more interested in fighting other Sunni groups to gain territory in the central north and east than fighting Assad. Brian Glyn Williams, *Counter Jihad: The American Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 273.

c This was about the same number of personnel President Obama deployed in Iraq by the summer of 2016 to bolster Iraqi Army forces and Kurdish peshmerga forces in their offensive against the Islamic State. Jonathan Landay, Phil Stewart, and Mark Hosenball, “Russia’s Syria force grows to 4,000, U.S. officials say,” Reuters, November 4, 2015; Helene Cooper, “U.S. to Send 600 More Troops to Iraq to Help Retake Mosul From ISIS,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2016.



*A firefighter attempts to extinguish a fire after alleged Russian airstrikes on two hospitals in Azaz in Aleppo province on December 25, 2015. (Anas Sabaag/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)*

tempt to weaken the rebellion by attrition.<sup>38</sup>

Having expended their primary efforts in the northwest against non-Islamic State Sunni rebels, Russia finally began tentative operations against the Islamic State in the central Syrian Desert in the spring of 2016. Although the Kremlin had announced in mid-March 2016 that Russia's involvement in Syria was over,<sup>39</sup> on March 27, Russian air power assisted the Assad regime in recapturing the central desert city of Tadmur, home to the ancient ruins of Palmyra, from the Islamic State.<sup>40</sup> Putin could now finally offer the world proof that he was a partner in the war on the Islamic State.

To celebrate his victory, Putin in May had a symphony orchestra flown into Syria to perform a bold, surprise concert in a second-century A.D. Roman amphitheater in the heart of Islamic State-ravaged Palmyra. While under Islamic State control, the amphitheater had served as the set for its 2015 film that featured the execution of 25 Assad regime soldiers by Islamic State fighters.<sup>41</sup> The stark contrast between the Islamic State atrocities and the Russian orchestra was extremely symbolic.

## Target Aleppo

After the liberation of Palmyra, Russia returned its focus to the northwest and especially the key strategic prize of Aleppo, where the end of rebel control in eastern Aleppo would spell defeat for the five-year rebellion. In the last six months, Russia has been heavily involved in supporting Syrian government advances on rebel-controlled areas in eastern Aleppo, which have taken a high toll on civilians.<sup>42</sup> Yet gains made by the Russian-Syrian alliance during the summer, often with the support of Hezbollah, remained fragile and reversible.<sup>43</sup>

On August 16, to reverse Jabhat Fateh al-Sham-led attacks in Aleppo, Russia began using long-range Tu-22M3 Backfire and Sukhoi-34 Fullback heavy bombers flying from an Iranian base known as Shahid Nojeh, 30 miles north of Hamadan in western Iran.<sup>44</sup> But the Russian-Iranian agreement was fraught with tension and collapsed just a week after it was announced.<sup>45</sup> Despite this, in September, the Russian air force helped the Syrian Army re-impose a siege on Sunni-rebel controlled eastern Aleppo that had been broken for a month in August. While the pace of Russian airstrikes dropped off in September and October due to a weak ceasefire brokered with the United States, they increased again following its collapse.<sup>46</sup> Later in the fall, the Russians increased their aerial firepower by deploying the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* to the eastern Mediterranean. On November 15, Russia announced the launch of an intensified air campaign designed to break the resistance of Sunni rebels in eastern Aleppo. A day later, the Russians proclaimed, "For the first time in our naval history, the *Admiral Kuznetsov* started taking part in combat."<sup>47</sup> Two days later, the Russians announced that aircraft flying from the aircraft carrier had struck a "major blow" against Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (the former al-Nusra) by killing three "well-known" commanders from the group.<sup>48</sup>

From mid-November 2016, Russia provided the Syrian Army with vital air support in a fierce offensive that gained pro-regime forces control, Russia claimed, of approximately 40 percent of rebel-held eastern Aleppo and effectively split the territory in two by November 28.<sup>49</sup> The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights stated, "the rebels have lost control of all the neighbourhoods in the north of east Aleppo, and this is their worst defeat since they seized half the city." This prompted "the first exodus of this kind from east Aleppo since 2012" as 20,000 civilians fled the besieged portions

of the city.<sup>50</sup> The next stage of the joint operation appears to be to further divide the remaining rebel-held territory into what the Russian Ministry of Defense calls "security districts" so as to control and capture them by "push[ing] the gunmen to turn themselves [in] ... or accept national reconciliation under the terms of the Syrian state."<sup>51</sup>

By late November 2016, it was apparent that the Russian intervention had, despite the outcry from the West over widespread civilian casualties, propped up the crumbling Assad regime and allowed it to maintain control over much of the western corridor where most Syrians lived. It also fulfilled Putin's goal of preventing the fall of Damascus to so-called jihadist terrorist forces and allowed Assad to go on the offensive from Daraa in the south to Hama and Homs to Latakia to Aleppo in the north. From the fall of 2015 to the fall of 2016, Operation Vozmezdie in both its official and unofficial phases had clearly reshaped the battlefield in western Syria, but it did not have much impact on the Islamic State's territorial holdings.

## Blowback

Even as Putin's military intervention in Syria antagonized the United States and its NATO and Sunni Arab allies, a different sort of risk began to materialize. Shortly after Russian airstrikes commenced, a diverse assortment of 41 Syrian rebel groups—which included powerful groupings such as the Ahrar al-Sham, Islam Army, and the Levant Front—threatened Russia, stating that "any occupation force to our beloved country is a legitimate target."<sup>52</sup>

Next, in an October 13, 2015, audiotape, then-Islamic State spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani called for "Islamic youth everywhere [to] ignite jihad against the Russians and the Americans in their crusaders' war against Muslims."<sup>53</sup> This call to action was quickly answered. On October 31, an Islamic State affiliate in Egypt's Sinai Desert claimed responsibility for downing a Russian charter plane flying from the Sinai resort town of Sharm el Sheikh to St. Petersburg with a bomb, killing all 224 people on board. This proved to be the deadliest disaster in Russian aviation history, and the Islamic State gloated by posting a picture of the small bomb it claimed was used to bring down the plane on its online magazine, Dabiq. In the publication, the Islamic State justified its action as a response to the Russian airstrikes in Syria, which it claimed were "a rash decision of arrogance."<sup>54</sup> It was at this time that media in Russia began casting the campaign in Syria as one of revenge (*mest*) or retribution (*vozmezdie*) to punish the "criminal terrorists" for their attacks on Russians.<sup>55</sup>

There were also calls for terrorist action by Jabhat al-Nusra. On October, 12, 2015, the head of the group, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, released a 21-minute audio message online titled "The Russian Intervention – The Last Arrow," in which he described the Russians as "Eastern Crusaders." He also called for retaliatory attacks as well as the need for the "mujahideen in the Caucasus to distract" Russia's attention from the war in Syria whenever possible by killing Russians in their home country.<sup>56</sup> Just hours after his message was released, two mortar shells struck the Russian embassy compound in Damascus as hundreds of pro-government supporters rallied outside in support of Russian airstrikes.<sup>57</sup> In the summer of 2016, after Putin's involvement in fighting against the Islamic State in Palmyra, the terrorist group renewed its threats on the Russian Federation. On July 30, 2016, it released a nine-minute video in which a Russian-speaking fighter threatened Putin directly, declaring, "Listen O Putin, we will come to you in Russia, we will kill you all in your



homes, Allah willing.” The masked militant also urged Muslims to launch attacks on Russian soil.<sup>58</sup>

Putin seems to have recognized the possibility that such threats could be fulfilled by Russian citizens fighting in Syria who might return home to carry out punitive terror attacks. While speaking at a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) summit in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, on October 16, 2015, Putin stated, “There are an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 fighters from Russia and other CIS member states fighting for ISIL ... we certainly cannot allow them to use the experience they are getting in Syria on home soil.”<sup>59</sup> While the claim for such large numbers of jihadis from the CIS in Syria is difficult to substantiate, Putin’s fears of retaliatory attacks were not overblown. One scholar has found that as many as one in nine foreign fighters become terrorists upon returning home.<sup>60</sup>

Such fears were magnified as the Islamic State began losing significant territory at an escalated pace in 2016. This led to fears that the fall of the ‘state’ that had stirred the imagination of thousands of radicalized Russian Islamists could potentially prompt a return migration of Russian jihadis to their homeland with considerable battlefield experience, extensive networks, and lethal intent. According to an estimate by the Soufan Group, already by September 2015 there were 2,500 jihadis from Russia inside Syria, while Russia put the number of Russian Islamic State fighters at 2,000.<sup>61</sup> By this time, Russian leaders were increasingly worried about the potential for a backlash if these jihadis returned home from the Syrian battlefields. On April 22, 2015, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov summed up these fears. “I believe ISIS is our greatest enemy right now ... They are already returning home. They come here to rest after fighting and can get up to dirty tricks at home.”<sup>62</sup>

The majority of Russian Muslims fighting in Syria and Iraq come from the insurgency-plagued north Caucasian Muslim republics of Chechnya and Dagestan and have established a reputation as some of the most fierce and effective fighters within the Islamic State.<sup>4</sup> This has created concern that they could reignite a largely

suppressed jihadist insurgency in the Caucasus.<sup>6</sup>

On December 2, 2015, the Islamic State broadcasted its intent to inspire attacks in Russia by releasing a gruesome video in which one of its Russian-speaking militants in Syria vowed to unleash murderous attacks on the people of Russia. He stated, “you will not find peace in your homes. We will kill your sons ... for each son you killed here. And we will destroy your homes for each home you destroyed here.”<sup>63</sup> He then used a hunting knife to behead a Russian citizen who confessed to being a spy for the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) and reporting on the identity of “brothers” fighting in Syria.

Threats, calls for action, and acts of brutality, such as the beheading, appeared to have inspired self-starter jihadis and disaffected Muslims in Russia to imitate their brutality. Initially, Islamic State-inspired attacks focused on Russian security forces in the insurgency-plagued southern Muslim Russian republic of Dagestan. On December 30, 2015, Islamic State-inspired gunmen opened fire on a group of people standing on the panoramic terrace of the ancient Dagestani citadel of Derbent, killing one and injuring 11 others. The terrorist group would subsequently state, “With the help of Allah, the warriors of the Kalifate were able to attack a group of Russian special service officers ... killing one officer and injuring others.”<sup>64</sup>

The Islamic State targeted police officers in Dagestan again in late February 2016 when a suicide bomber drove a car loaded with explosives into a police checkpoint in the town of Dzhimikent, killing two officers and injuring approximately 10.<sup>65</sup> It is unclear whether the bomber in this attack was a fighter who had returned from Syria. The Islamic State subsequently announced, “[o]ne of the Caliphate’s soldiers advanced with a car bomb towards a barrier set up by the apostate Dagestani police ... and blew it up in the midst of their gathering leading to the death or injury of all the elements stationed at the barrier thanks be to God.”<sup>66</sup>

This was followed up by two terrorist acts in Dagestan in late March, one an IED attack on a police convoy and a second a suicide bombing, claimed by the Wilayat Kavkaz (The Caucasus Province) of the Islamic State that led to the death of several members of the security forces.<sup>67</sup>

By then, Islamic State-inspired terrorists had managed to strike deeper into the Russian heartland. On March 2, 2016, Gulchekhra Bobokulova, a 38-year-old nanny from Uzbekistan, decapitated a four-year-old girl she had been babysitting in Moscow. She then proceeded to set fire to the family’s flat and brandish the child’s severed head outside the Oktyabrskoye Pole subway station while shouting “Allahu Akbar” and “I’m a terrorist.” Bobokulova, who subsequently claimed that “Allah ordered” her to kill the young girl as

d Most sources agree that the *hijra* (religious migration) of hundreds of muhajireen (those who partake in *hijra*) from the failed jihad in the north Caucasus to Syria began in 2012. In the summer of that year, Tarkhan Batirashvili, a Georgian Chechen better known by his *kunya* (nom de guerre) of Omar al-Shishani (Omar the Chechen) established the Muhajireen Brigade in Syria composed almost entirely of battle-tested Muslims from the Russian Federation. These hardened fighters played an outsized role as “force multipliers” among the thousands of foreigners taking up arms against Assad in Syria at the time. Most importantly, al-Shishani and his followers played a key role in operations against Assad regime bases in the Aleppo vicinity and swore *bay’a* to the Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in December 2013, before being killed in a U.S. airstrike in July 2016. “ISIL Says Omar al Shishani Killed in Airstrike,” Al Jazeera, July 14, 2016. For more on the large number of Dagestanis and Chechens who traveled to Syria, see Emil Suleimanov, “The Participation of North Caucasian Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War and its Security Implications,” Rubin Center, February 2015; Emil Suleimanov, “North Caucasian Fighters Join the Syrian Civil War,” *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, August 21, 2013; also see the blog <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/> tracking Chechen and Dagestani jihadis in Syria. The authors’ research indicates the large majority of Russian Muslims fighting in Syria and Iraq come from Chechnya and Dagestan.

e In the early years of the Syrian civil war, Russian authorities turned a blind eye to the emigration of jihadis from the northern Caucasus to fight in Syria as a way of diverting the aspirations of Russian Federation militants from the region who had previously attempted to build a trans-ethnic jihadist state in the north Caucasus known as the Imarat Kavkaz, or Caucasus Emirate. The militant insurgency, which aimed to revive the Imamate of the 19th century jihadist leader Imam Shamil, was brutally crushed from 2014 to 2015 via the systematic killing of its two self-declared emirs and many of its followers by Russian security forces. In June 2015, the Caucasian Emirate’s remaining leaders pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth and the Boston Marathon Bombings*. (Dartmouth, MA: University Press New England, 2015), chapter six.



retribution for Russian airstrikes in Syria, explained that she was inspired by Islamic State beheading videos. She proclaimed, “I saw how they cut off heads, and I did it.”<sup>68</sup>

On June 28, 2016, the threat of jihadist blowback from foreign fighters from the former Soviet bloc in Syria came into sharp focus when a Chechen-led group of Uzbek, Dagestani, and Kyrgyz Islamic State terrorists launched an assault on Istanbul’s Ataturk airport, killing 42.<sup>69</sup>

Meanwhile, the drumbeat of Islamic State-inspired attacks inside Russia continued. On August 17, 2016, two Chechen men wielding axes and firearms attempted to murder two police officers just east of Moscow at a traffic police station on the Schelkovskoe Highway. Both police officers were injured, one severely, but survived the attack. The next day the Islamic State released a video of the two attackers, referring to them as “soldiers of the Islamic State,” pledging *bay`a* (loyalty) to al-Baghdadi. The video concluded with a threat of more Islamic State attacks inside Russia.<sup>70</sup>

On October 23, 2016, two men opened fire on a policeman who was checking their car in the city of Nizhny Novgorod in western Russia. The police officer was, however, able to return fire and mortally wound his attackers. The Islamic State subsequently claimed that two “soldiers of the Islamic State” had carried it out.<sup>71</sup>

Most recently, on November 14, 2016, a bold terror plot involving Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tajik nationals who planned a Paris-style mass casualty attack in malls in Moscow and St. Petersburg “to prove their loyalty” to the Islamic State was foiled by the FSB just before it could be carried out.<sup>72</sup> While no evidence has emerged of Islamic State direction in the plot, had this attack been successful, it would have certainly weakened Putin’s claim that Russia’s Syria intervention has made Russia safer.

The Russian president claimed it was preventing “criminals who already tasted blood” from returning “back home and continuing their evil doings.”<sup>73</sup> As yet, there is no firm evidence that has been made public that actual Islamic State recruits or other jihadist veterans of the fighting in Syria have been involved in plots to attack inside Russia. But it seems inevitable that with the territory of caliphate shrinking, a significant number of fighters will seek to return home.

In the meantime, back in Syria, Putin’s callous and widely broadcasted bombardment of Sunni rebel-held eastern Aleppo in the summer and fall of 2016 exacerbated Sunni-Shi`a tensions. The Russian aerial bombing of a large Red Crescent aid convoy bringing much-needed relief to Sunni rebel-held territory in eastern Aleppo in September 2016 also appeared to signal the collapse of potential rapprochement between Moscow and Washington.<sup>74</sup> When combined with the year-long indiscriminate bombing of schools, bakeries, hospitals, and civilian-packed neighborhoods in the city, Putin’s actions further enflamed bloody sectarianism in the civil war. Moscow’s indiscriminate bombing and support for Assad placed the Russian Federation firmly in the Damascus-Hezbollah-Tehran axis, at the expense of relations with the wider Sunni world. This has put Moscow squarely in the crosshairs of thousands of Sunni jihadis in the Middle East. The increasingly sharp invective against Russia in jihadist propaganda suggests that, for some jihadis, Moscow is now seen as an even greater “far enemy” than Washington.

While the dangers of jihadist retribution have increased, making Russia a primary target for global jihadis, the risks of diplomatic blowback lessened after a surprise result in the U.S. presidential election. Putin, who seemed to have been seriously mistaken in his calculation that the United States and its allies would recognize him as a partner in a war on terrorists in Syria, appears to be optimistic that he can now work with U.S. President-elect Donald Trump to mend relations with the United States and take the fight to the common enemy. On November 13, 2016, Putin called to congratulate Trump on his election win. Tellingly, he later reported that the two leaders had talked about the “the need to work together in the struggle against the number-one common enemy — international terrorism and extremism.”<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusion

Putin’s military intervention in Syria has so far been successful in protecting Russian assets in Syria and ending for the foreseeable future any existential threat to the Assad regime. But in wider strategic terms, it has put Russia in the crosshairs of the Islamic State, al-Qa`ida, and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham as well as their extremist supporters in places like Moscow and St. Petersburg. Therefore, it would not be surprising if the net result of Putin’s adventurism in the deserts of the Middle East for those living in the Russian Federation is a surge in terrorist attacks in the *rodina* (motherland). This blowback could manifest itself in the form of embittered and battle-tested Russian jihadis returning home from the collapsed Islamic State caliphate to carry out their own version of Operation Vozmezdie to punish the “Eastern Crusaders in Moscow.” It could also appear in the form of extremists within Russia answering global jihadis’ call to carry out lone-wolf attacks of the sort seen in Nice, Orlando, and San Bernardino.

If Putin can assist the Syrian Army in crushing the last pocket of rebels held up in eastern Aleppo following the late November government victory in the northern parts of this rebel-held area, he and Assad will clearly have the Sunni rebels on the back foot. They will also have an opportunity to expand the campaign into Idlib Province, the last remaining major Sunni rebel bastion in the northwest. But despite recent gains by pro-regime forces in Syria, the Russian president has not yet decisively broken the stalemate in the Syrian conflict. Nor has he, despite apparently warmer relations with the incoming U.S. administration, yet won the acceptance of the West as a partner in a war on terrorism in Syria and further afield.

But the Russian intervention has potentially even broader global security implications. In Syria, there is a risk that if non-Islamic State Sunni rebel groups are critically weakened by the Russian-Syrian military campaign, the Islamic State will once again seize an opportunity to fill a vacuum and exploit anger. By intervening on one side in a sectarian civil war, Russia has also exacerbated sectarian tensions across the Middle East, helping to create exactly the sorts of conditions in which terrorist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida thrive.<sup>f</sup> **CTC**

<sup>f</sup> A detailed assessment of the potentially profound international security consequences of worsening Sunni-Shia tensions in the Middle East is beyond the scope of this article.

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# The Mosul Campaign: From Here to the Horizon

By Tim Lister

**The military campaign to retake the city of Mosul from the Islamic State is underway but faces an uphill struggle. During a six-week visit to northern Iraq in October and November, the author followed the determined and disciplined resistance shown by the militants amid the most intensive urban warfare since Beirut in the 1980s. The Iraqi Security Forces, rebuilt as a conventional force, are struggling with the combat conditions after early successes in Mosul's hinterland. And the longer the campaign continues, the more likely that a humanitarian catastrophe will disrupt or even overwhelm the offensive and that the fragile coalition put together with considerable mediation from the United States will begin to fray. The campaign for Mosul and how its aftermath is managed is an acid test for the future of Iraq as a state. It will also be a profound influence on the future of the Islamic State, which explains the extraordinary lengths to which the group is going to prolong the battle and exploit divisions among its adversaries.**

**O**n November 14, the Islamic State released a long compilation video showing its operations in and around Mosul. One or two scenes had appeared in previous releases. Many others appeared current; geographical features confirmed they had been filmed in the east of the city.<sup>1</sup> The video illustrated in graphic detail just how tough the fight for Mosul has become. The defensive frailties of Iraqi units were all too evident. There seemed little coherence to their positions, and they were too easily surprised.

The sequences confirmed that the Islamic State in Mosul still has an impressive array of weapons at its disposal, remains exceptionally mobile, and—despite the mounting pressure on its crown jewel—

has not lost its flair for publicity.<sup>a</sup> Several suicide vehicle (VBIED) attacks were filmed with professional clarity by the organization's own drones. The bird's-eye view showed vehicles converted into armored suicide bombs accelerating out of side-streets and alleys at high speed, targeting Iraqi tanks, Humvees, and static checkpoints.

Even before Iraqi military and peshmerga units reached the outskirts of Mosul, the Islamic State gave notice of the ferocity with which it would defend the city, sending waves of VBIEDs against its adversaries. That it intends to put up a determined defense was reiterated in a rare audio message from its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, released in early November.<sup>2</sup>

This article examines the tactics deployed by the Islamic State to defend Mosul and the challenges faced by Iraqi forces in taking back the city, based on the six weeks the author spent in northern Iraq between the end of September and mid-November, including time at the frontlines east of Mosul. It also examines the future challenges in stabilizing Mosul and defeating the Islamic State in Iraq.

Visits to Kurdish peshmerga frontlines and to a forward base of the Iraqi 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, as well as interviews with commanders and Kurdish officials, showed a heartening level of collaboration between Kurdish and Iraqi forces. But, at the same time, Kurdish commanders and officials made it clear they had no intention of joining the battle in the city itself, and some openly questioned the capacity of Iraqi forces for evicting the Islamic State from Mosul. They also said the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) were insufficiently thorough in clearing villages, making them vulnerable to attack from behind.<sup>3</sup>

None of those commanders, and very few others with whom the author spoke, expected the offensive to be concluded by the end of the year, the deadline set by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. And almost all expressed concern about inadequate planning for pacifying and rehabilitating Mosul after the Islamic State is expelled.

The shaping operations to tighten the noose on Mosul began on October 17 and involved both peshmerga and Iraqi units advancing westward to the city. Even here, the resistance in small villages and abandoned towns was furious, with dozens of VBIEDs inflicting casualties on the advancing forces. Fully two weeks after isolating the town of Bashiqa, peshmerga forces were stunned by the resistance of a handful of Islamic State fighters who had remained hidden in the ruins.<sup>4</sup> But by the end of October, forward units were poised on the eastern and northern outskirts of the city.

Two of the author's colleagues—CNN senior international cor-

*Tim Lister has been a journalist for more than 30 years with the BBC and CNN. He has traveled extensively in the Middle East and was at Tora Bora in Afghanistan in late 2001. In the last two years, he has spent significant time reporting for CNN from the frontlines of the war against the Islamic State in northern Syria and in Iraq. He is co-author with Paul Cruickshank and Morten Storm of Agent Storm: My Life Inside al Qaeda and the CIA. Follow @TimListerCNN*

a While there has been a reduction in the group's media output in recent months, the Islamic State has nevertheless released two lengthy video compilations of combat in and around Mosul and several other accounts of individual battles as well as an audio message from its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

respondent Arwa Damon and photojournalist Brice Laine—had first-hand experience with the ISF's tactical shortcomings as it tried to breach Mosul's eastern neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup> They were with the Salahudin Regiment of the Counter Terrorism Force (CTF) when it entered the city on November 4. Islamic State fighters waited until the regiment was inside the densely populated Aden district. They first ambushed a support group in the adjacent neighborhood of Kirkukli from several sides, forcing it to retreat with heavy loss of life. One Iraqi soldier described the resistance as "crazy." Islamic State fighters, he said, had emerged from alleys just a few meters away and dropped grenades from rooftops. Commanders were unable to respond to mortar fire as it came from areas where civilians were present.

The Salahudin Regiment's column—comprising vulnerable Humvees with just a couple of MRAPs (Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected) among its 30-odd vehicles—was isolated. It came under sustained attack in narrow streets for more than 24 hours, losing all but three of its vehicles. Islamic State fighters targeted the front and rear of the trapped convoy, firing RPGs from rooftops and sending suicide bombers on motorbikes and in cars. In an effort to counter the threat of VBIEDs, military bulldozers hastily erected barricades of cars and other obstacles.

The Islamic State fighters were an agile attacking force with intimate knowledge of the local environment, and they made up for numerical inferiority with complex attacks focused on areas where conventional forces struggled to react. That night, as remnants of

the CTF unit took shelter in nearby houses, Islamic State fighters plundered their wrecked vehicles for weapons and recorded themselves doing so.<sup>b</sup>

Many of the regiment's soldiers seemed to have little sense of Mosul's geography. Most were Shi'a from other parts of Iraq; some were clearly apprehensive about entering this predominantly Sunni city. One back-up convoy entered the Aden neighborhood only to find itself unable to ford a creek.

The experience was a cautionary one for the CTF. After relatively smooth progress on the approaches to the city, entering Mosul suddenly posed new challenges. Using airpower became more difficult in densely populated areas. In several neighborhoods, residents said Islamic State fighters had forced people out of their homes so they could booby-trap the properties.<sup>c</sup> Vehicle bombs were detonated by remote control; there seemed an inexhaustible supply of suicide bombers. And snipers operated from the rooftops.

The intense combat involved in breaching even the outermost eastern neighborhoods appears to have shocked some Iraqi com-

b The video of them ransacking the remnants of the convoy was published by the Islamic State's Amaq media center on November 6, 2016.

c One source said that civilians detained for minor infractions such as smoking or beards of insufficient length had been given three options: lashing, prison time, or digging 10 meters of trenches. This had allowed Islamic State to build miles of tunnels in just a few months. Author's telephone conversations with civilians in Mosul.



Northern Iraq (Rowan Technology)

manders. Damon and Laine encountered an onslaught of VBIEDs as the unit they were accompanying entered Kirkukli and then Aden. The same situation unfolded elsewhere. One Iraqi officer complained that “fighting without being able to use tanks and with soldiers unused to urban warfare is putting troops in a tough situation.”<sup>6</sup>

Through much of November, even districts declared ‘liberated’ saw a resurgence of attacks by militants. The Islamic State has assembled a vast arsenal of improvised mortar and artillery weapons in Mosul, typically with a range of four or five kilometers (2.5 miles.) Many of the launchers were mobilized on pickup trucks or hidden among thousands of abandoned buildings. Mortars were fired at random into liberated areas, killing civilians and detracting from the sense of security that the Iraqi military was trying to instill in ‘liberated’ areas.<sup>4</sup> On several occasions, the Iraqi Joint Military Command issued premature statements about liberating an area only for fighting to erupt again.<sup>6</sup>

The defenders made use of the network of tunnels they had built. A source with contacts inside Mosul showed the author where some of the tunnels ran. Besides deeper excavations used to protect the leadership, the Islamic State had built a series of essentially covered trenches running west to east, from the heart of the city to the outskirts. These were big enough for motorcycles (which the Islamic State has used in sizeable numbers in Mosul) and were often connected inside houses, allowing for materiel to be stocked and distributed under cover.<sup>7</sup>

By late November, after nearly a month of combat, Iraqi forces had made stuttering progress in the eastern half of the city. Among the positives, there was further progress in degrading the Islamic State’s leadership. One of the leaders killed was Mahmoud Shukri al-Nuaimi, a senior commander also known as Sheikh Faris.<sup>8</sup> There was also a higher rate of success in targeting VBIEDs.<sup>8</sup>

But Iraqi military casualties—if undisclosed—were high, as visits by the author’s colleagues to field hospitals and frontlines made clear. Weeks after entering the Aden and Tahrir neighborhoods, CTF units were still taking casualties from VBIED attacks in both places. Several senior officers, who declined to be named, acknowledged there were heavy casualties daily.<sup>9</sup> A major in the CTF in Aden said on November 19 that the Islamic State had carried out five VBIED attacks on that day in areas that were still being cleared. One attack had killed seven soldiers.<sup>10</sup> But the Iraqi Military Command said no casualty figures would be disclosed until the offensive was finished.

Many of the ISF units doing the heavy lifting around Mosul—the Golden Division, the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, and CTF—have been

batting the Islamic State for two years, in Fallujah, Ramadi, Baiji, and elsewhere. They have suffered attrition and frequently deploy patched-up equipment. There are also resupply issues. In one instance during the battle for the town of Bartella east of Mosul an Abrams M1 tank used its last shell to destroy an onrushing VBIED.<sup>11</sup> The Iraqi military group accompanied by the author’s colleagues inside Mosul nearly ran out of ammunition.

The offensive has run into other problems. For much of November, the Islamic State faced little pressure from the south or west and was able to focus its resistance in the east, a sprawl of industrial and residential areas. Nor was there any measurable resistance inside Mosul. Witnesses spoke of a short-lived revolt at the end of October in the crowded Wadi Hajar neighborhood in the southwest of the city, where an overnight gun battle left several Islamic State fighters dead.<sup>12</sup> But the group was able to penetrate the area the following day and, according to witnesses, later executed 75 men alleged to have been involved.<sup>5</sup> No similar account has since emerged.

Some residents have provided information to the ISF on Islamic State deployments, despite immense risk.<sup>13</sup> The Islamic State crucified alleged ‘spies’ in public places as a warning to others. Witnesses said the group had left “dozens of bodies” at intersections, in both eastern and western districts of Mosul, with notes attached: ‘Used cell phones to leak information to the ISF.’ Being in possession of a SIM card is punishable by death.<sup>14</sup>

As the Institute for the Study of War noted, the Islamic State used “the execution campaign to demonstrate control over its population, deter the ISF from advancing lest [the Islamic State] retaliates with executions, and tamp down on possible internal resistance.”<sup>15</sup>

For their part, ISF commanders must also contend with Islamic State sympathizers in liberated areas providing targeting information for mortar fire and suicide bombers. It is not enough for the ISF to focus on the frontlines; in the absence of holding forces, they need to focus on what is behind them.

## The Civilian Issue

The number of civilians still in Mosul when the offensive began was estimated at somewhere between 1.2 and 1.5 million, making the battle much more difficult for a coalition intent on minimizing civilian casualties, avoiding destruction of infrastructure and homes, and encouraging residents to stay rather than flee.<sup>h</sup>

These aims might seem contradictory: the simplest way to minimize civilian casualties would be to open escape corridors for them. But a massive exodus would stretch the capacity of the United Nations and aid agencies beyond their breaking point.<sup>16</sup> There are already 3.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq, two-thirds of them in northern Iraq in areas controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).<sup>17</sup>

An uncontrolled flood of civilians out of the city would be vulnerable to infiltration by Islamic State fighters, seeking both to escape and to carry out suicide bomb attacks at screening points. One

d This overall picture was formed by an analysis of extensive video evidence; comments by Iraqi military officers; and contacts with Mosul and former Mosul residents. In some instances, sources are not fully described for reasons of their security. In the case of some Iraqi officers, they were unauthorized to speak to the media.

e On November 4, 2016, within 24 hours of the advance into eastern Mosul, Iraq’s Joint Military Command declared that six districts (Al Malayan, Al Samah, Al Khadraa, Kirkukli, Quds, and Al Karama) had been liberated. All of them saw renewed attacks by the Islamic State over the following days and weeks, some of which forced Iraqi units to pull back.

f According to Iraqi military sources, Nuaimi had been a high-ranking intelligence officer under Saddam Hussein. Author interview, Iraqi military sources, fall 2016.

g According to former residents and activists interviewed by the author, the Islamic State used records it had seized listing former police and military personnel to identify the alleged perpetrators. Residents and witnesses communicating by telephone and text with CNN producers, October and November 2016.

h United Nations officials and NGOs who spoke with the author agreed the likely population of the city itself was within this range.



persistent fear voiced by Kurdish peshmerga commanders was of young teenage boys trained by Islamic State to carry out suicide attacks while hidden among the civilian outflow.<sup>18</sup>

At the beginning of November, residents of one neighborhood of Mosul (al Karama) confirmed the emergence of about 100 teenagers, often on motorbikes and wearing suicide belts, as ‘shock troops.’ These appear to be just a few of the ‘Cubs of the Caliphate’ that the Islamic State frequently featured in its media output, although the total number of indoctrinated and trained youth remains unknown.<sup>19</sup>

There were also multiple reports of civilians being prevented from leaving neighborhoods still under Islamic State control. Thousands more were force-marched or transported into Mosul from outlying villages, especially to the south, according to witness reports, potentially swelling the number of human shields available to the Islamic State. This makes an already difficult task even more hazardous.<sup>20</sup>

“If there were no civilians, we’d just burn it all,” Major General Sami al-Aridhi told *The Washington Post* on November 11.<sup>21</sup> Al-Aridhi said he had been forced to pause operations at one point because there were too many families in the streets.

But the chances of a mass exodus, even in liberated areas of Mosul, continue to grow. In a statement on November 17, U.N. agencies and NGOs warned that “in many newly retaken areas, civilian infrastructure such as water and power plants, schools and hospitals are damaged and medical services often unavailable ... many families are forced to drink untreated water from wells; their children are unvaccinated, without formal education, and many are in high need of psycho-social support.”<sup>22</sup>

As of late November, there were already more than 70,000 internally displaced from the city and surrounding areas. If the ISF begins to use more indiscriminate force, such as the use of thermobaric rocket launchers, to dislodge the Islamic State, more will vote with their feet.<sup>1</sup>

Multiple sources, as well as coalition intelligence,<sup>23</sup> believe the Islamic State will ultimately focus the bulk of its defensive efforts on the older parts of Mosul on the left bank of the Tigris. These comprise tightly packed neighborhoods where the use of heavy armor would be difficult.<sup>24</sup> Satellite photographs analyzed by the political risk group Stratfor show the Islamic State has blockaded most of the entrance roads from the south with T-walls and other wreckage.<sup>25</sup> Seizing western Mosul will be even harder than taking the east, especially as escape routes for the militants across the western desert have been cut off by the largely Shi’a paramilitaries of the Hashd al-Shaabi. Those remaining, especially foreign fighters, have little option but to fight to the death.

Gradually, the northward offensive along the left bank of the Tigris and toward Mosul airport began to catch up with progress in the east and north. The liberation of the town of Hammam al-Alil (some 12 miles south of Mosul) allowed Iraqi Federal Police to push north toward Mosul airport. But by late November, nearly four weeks after ISF units attacked the east of the city, no offensive action in the western half of the city proper had begun.

## A War Within A War?

Further west, the Hashd al-Shaabi and other groups under its umbrella surrounded Tal Afar, a stronghold of the Islamic State with a population of some 50,000, by late November.<sup>j</sup> According to the agreed blueprint for the campaign,<sup>26</sup> the Hashd al-Shaabi—also referred to as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU)—had the task of sealing off escape routes for the Islamic State in an arc running northward across the desert.

The PMU reported capturing the air base south of Tal Afar on November 16 with the help of Iraqi (though notably not coalition) air strikes.<sup>k</sup> However, their presence in this now predominantly Sunni area remains highly contentious.

Prime Minister al-Abadi reaffirmed on November 23 that the town would be liberated by the Iraqi army and police forces along with former residents of Tal Afar, including both Sunni and Shi’a Turkmen.<sup>27</sup> It is a highly combustible coalition; elements of the Hashd al-Shaabi have been known to ignore the central government in previous campaigns.<sup>28</sup>

There were also complaints from Sunni tribal figures of abuses and random shelling by the Shi’a forces as they moved through villages west of Mosul. Amnesty International said in November it had documented the killings of several Sunnis by Shiite paramilitaries in villages south of Mosul.<sup>29</sup> A leader of the Sunni Sada Bakarah tribe accused the Hashd al-Shaabi of atrocities in villages seized from the Islamic State, including random shelling of civilians and summary executions.<sup>30</sup>

Some in the PMU have also left open the possibility that the Hashd will swing east to the outskirts of Mosul. Faleh al-Fayad, Iraq’s national security advisor, is quoted as saying, “the PMU’s goal is to liberate the city of Tal Afar and reach the outskirts of Mosul, without entering the city unless by an order from the commander in chief of the armed forces.”<sup>31</sup>

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has made clear that any move on Tal Afar would be a red line for his government because of the town’s substantial Turkmen population.

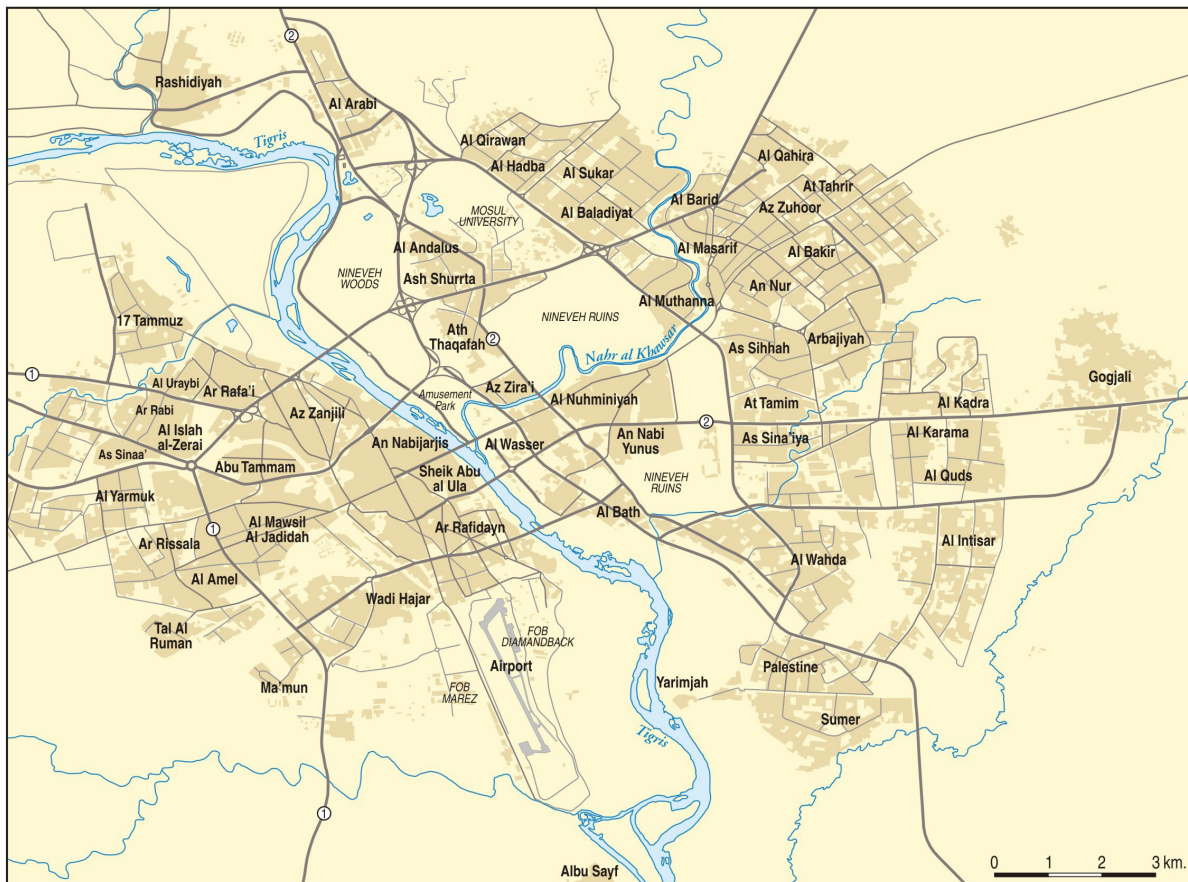
“Tal Afar is a very sensitive issue for us,” Erdogan said on October 29. “We definitely do not regard it [the militia’s involvement] positively in Tal Afar and Sinjar.”<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, Turkish armor took up positions at Salopi on the Iraqi-Turkish border.

Spokesmen for the Hashd al-Shaabi have said bluntly that their presence in Nineveh will not be temporary nor restricted. Rather, they see it as a corridor to join the battle in Syria, which is a two-hour drive east from Tal Afar, in aid of the Assad regime and against both the Islamic State and other Sunni rebel factions. “After clearing all our land from these terrorist gangs, we are fully ready to go to any place that contains a threat to Iraqi national security,”

j This estimate was provided to the author by U.N. officials and NGOs. The population in 2014 was approximately 200,000. Until the Islamic State’s arrival, there was a substantial Shi’a population in Tal Afar. The great majority fled—some as far as Najaf south of Baghdad—and some formed military units under the banner of the PMU to join the campaign to retake the town. See Zana Gulmohamad, “Unseating the Caliphate: Contrasting the Challenges of Liberating Fallujah and Mosul,” *CTC Sentinel* 9:10 (2016), and for analysis of the dynamics of the Tal Afar campaign, see Michael Knights and Matthew Schweitzer, “Shiite Militias Are Crashing the Mosul Offensive,” *Foreign Policy*, November 18, 2016.

k The PMU, the umbrella under which the Hashd al-Shabi operate, released several videos on November 16 showing their forces inside Tal Afar airport.

i These tanks—Russian-made TOS-1A Buratinos—have been seen in several places east of Mosul but as of mid-November do not appear to have been widely used.



*Map of Mosul (Institute for the Study of War)*

Ahmed al-Asadi, a spokesman for the PMU, told a news conference in Baghdad at the end of October.<sup>33</sup>

Some Kurdish officials worry that the PMU envisage a permanent presence on the borders of the KRG.<sup>34</sup> They even speculate that the Shi'a paramilitaries have eyes on Mount Sinjar to the west of Tal Afar, a lozenge-shaped mass used by Saddam Hussein during the 1991 Gulf War to launch SCUD missiles toward Israel.<sup>35</sup>

Sinjar is at the northern edge of the KRG's current frontline, and more than one Kurdish general regards the PMU as a much greater long-term threat than the passing irritant of the Islamic State.<sup>36</sup> The situation in the area is further complicated by the internal frictions between the peshmerga and Syrian Kurds who first entered the area in 2014 to help rescue thousands of Yazidis fleeing the Islamic State.<sup>37</sup>

## Mosul into 2017

There is the risk that as the offensive for Mosul drags on into 2017, friction about its prosecution and the displacement of perhaps hundreds of thousands of people will grow, and the sectarian fault-lines and competing agendas within the anti-Islamic State coalition will explode into view. And that would prove an early challenge for the incoming U.S. administration.

As a candidate, President-elect Donald Trump has made it plain he would "quickly and decisively bomb the hell out of ISIS."<sup>38</sup> He said in September that on his first day in office he would give his top generals a simple instruction. "They will have thirty days to submit to the Oval Office a plan for soundly and quickly defeating ISIS."<sup>39</sup>

Trump's premise is that the U.S.-led coalition is not ruthless

enough. In an interview with Fox News in September, Trump said, "we're hitting them every once in a while, we're hitting them in certain places, we're being very gentle about it."<sup>40</sup> And at a campaign event on October 24, Trump said, "we're bogged down in Mosul. The enemy is much tougher than they thought."<sup>41</sup>

But short of accepting far greater destruction as well as more civilian casualties and displacement, it is hard to see how more intensive air strikes would change the military balance overnight. Their role is to tip the scales in favor of ground forces. To borrow the words of U.S. Army General Wesley Clark about NATO's campaign to evict Serbian forces from Kosovo in 1997, "the air campaign was an effort to coerce, not to seize."<sup>42</sup>

Whether the new administration will double down on the presence of U.S. Special Forces in Iraq and change their role from 'advise and assist' to full-fledged involvement in combat is an open question. So is the possibility of more intense aerial bombardment to raze areas ahead of the advance of allied ground forces.

Beyond any changes President-elect Trump and his national security team may make to the U.S. military role in the Mosul campaign, other questions loom about broader regional policy, which will impact both the pacification of Mosul and efforts to intensify pressure on the Islamic State's last urban stronghold of Raqqa.

The first half of 2017 could see the Islamic State being pushed out of both cities and, in the eyes of many commentators, transitioning into an insurgency based in the Euphrates River valley on either side of the Syria-Iraq border but with deep networks of cells elsewhere. While the Islamic State may lose control of its significant conurbations, it will likely retain a presence in Iraq's western desert





*An Iraqi Special Forces soldier engages Islamic State fighters pushing through eastern Samah area and into the Arbagiah neighborhood of Mosul on November 11, 2016. (Odd Andersen/AFP/Getty Images)*

and may still control remote towns like Ba'aj and al Qaim. Even as the Mosul offensive was underway, it launched complex attacks in Kirkuk, the Hawija area, and Tikrit as well as an ambitious assault on the town of al Rutba in the far-west of Anbar Province. It also carried out a car-bomb attack in Fallujah in November, the first since the town's liberation in June, and then on November 18, a complex attack on Iraqi checkpoints in the town of Imam al-Gharbi, 50 miles south of Mosul, which had been liberated in August.<sup>43</sup>

The Institute for the Study of War noted that the Islamic State "has re-established or consolidated networks in the area or found residents that remain either tolerant of ISIS's ideology or opposed to the government enough to allow ISIS to infiltrate."<sup>44</sup>

The Islamic State may also find the right sociological conditions in areas like Diyala to survive and regroup.<sup>45</sup> It will likely revert to the structure that helped it survive the lean years of 2007-2011. This would involve "deactivating and dispersing its military units and reinforcing its intelligence, security, administrative, and financial groups,"<sup>46</sup> according to Patrick Ryan and Patrick B. Johnston, who argue that these 'enabler' elements could resurface in Mosul and elsewhere unless successfully targeted by the coalition and Iraqi forces. "Only once the Islamic State's underground network is fully defeated will there be a real chance for enduring security and stability in Mosul," they say.

The scale of the task should not be underestimated. Mosul has been a cauldron of subversion, criminality, and militancy for much of the post-Saddam era.<sup>47</sup> As former Moslawi resident Rasha al-Aqeedi points out, "the U.S. invasion only strengthened the Islamists' influence as activism transformed into the 'Islamic Party,' and they were well prepared to hijack Sunni politics in the absence of other competitors."<sup>48</sup> There was an interlude of increased stability between 2007 and 2011 before a more authoritarian (and sectarian) tone in Baghdad and the withdrawal of U.S. military guidance caused a rapid deterioration. As Michael Knights has put it, there was a "chronically deficient unity of effort and unity of command among Iraqi government, Kurdish, and Ninawa factions."<sup>49</sup> Now,

"Mosul residents will also be closely watching their liberators for signs of a return to 2014, with its punitive measures, restrictive curfews, and the widespread specter of arrest," Knights says.<sup>50</sup>

This is an anxiety the author has heard expressed many times over the last month. Until the arrival of the Islamic State, Mosul always had intricate demographics, with Kurds and Christians as important minorities. Judging by conversations the author and his colleagues have had with former residents over the past month, few seem likely to return without guarantees for their protection and rights. About half the Christian population of Bartella, a town to the east of Mosul seized by the Islamic State in 2014, has already left Iraq, according to the town's mayor and religious leaders.<sup>51</sup>

Multiple Kurdish officials say their greatest concern (one shared by many international observers) is about 'the day after' in Mosul, in terms of reconstruction, security, and governance. They say Masoud Barzani, president of the KRG, beseeched Prime Minister al-Abadi and other Iraqi officials for a comprehensive agreement on governing Mosul after the Islamic State's expulsion, to no avail.<sup>52</sup> Nor is there any consensus on a governor to drive recovery and stabilization.

U.S. officials have said that a 15,000-strong Sunni tribal police force is being trained to handle local security.<sup>53</sup> But Ned Parker, the former Baghdad bureau chief for Reuters, has noted that after previous operations against the Islamic State, "because the special forces are limited in manpower and primarily an offensive force, there is then a power vacuum ... militias have filled that void, becoming the primary force on the ground. Their political influence is a force multiplier."<sup>54</sup>

Various plans for a post-Islamic State political structure have been floated, including the creation of six to eight self-governing areas to accommodate the ethnic and sectarian mosaic of this part of Nineveh Province.<sup>55</sup> But none has been agreed to, and many politicians in Baghdad oppose tampering with the provincial structure for fear of setting off a nationwide clamor for devolution.<sup>56</sup> They also suspect that the KRG would use any breakup of Nineveh to bring



more areas—predominantly Christian—into its orbit.

The peshmerga were busy in October creating ‘facts on the ground,’ extending the berms and trenches that are the KRG’s *de facto* border to within 10 miles of Mosul. When the author asked one very senior Kurdish general whether these were intended as the KRG’s new limits, he grinned and replied, “why not?”<sup>57</sup>

The second greatest concern of KRG officials, one repeated at almost every encounter, is that once the Islamic State is expelled from Mosul, U.S. engagement will, in the words of one, “fall off a cliff.” The U.S. and coalition military contribution to the Mosul offensive has been crucial: intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets, the contribution of Special Operations Forces close to or on the frontlines, and persistent air strikes. But as important has been the diplomatic stamina to build and hold together a fractious coalition, which has included frequent mediation between Baghdad and the KRG.

Michael Knights is not alone in arguing for a continued U.S. presence long after the Islamic State is expunged from Mosul, saying that “U.S. forces should commit to at least three more years of extraordinary security cooperation, subject to review and extension.”<sup>58</sup> On the evidence of this author’s experiences in Iraq this fall, international support and mediation will be essential to underwrite a post-Islamic State Nineveh.

The liberation of Mosul could offer a template for a new constitutional dispensation, but it could also presage a new era of violence if mishandled by Baghdad and other parties. U.S. engagement will

be needed to try to prevent a repeat of the conditions that led to the incubation of the Islamic State in Nineveh and elsewhere and to mitigate the sectarianism that has plagued the post-Saddam years.

Iraq’s constitution provides for regional autonomy, but the history of post-Saddam Iraq has been one of centralization, especially under former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Both the United States and Iran, though for very different reasons, supported the creation of a strong (and inevitably Shi’a-dominated) Iraqi state.<sup>59</sup> But in accentuating centralized control, al-Maliki ultimately created the conditions for a failing state.

In Nineveh, absent political agreement, Sunni, Kurdish, Shabak, Christian, and Turkmen groups—themselves often divided—will compete in the vacuum left by the Islamic State’s departure. Without reconstruction, even-handed policing, the return of the rule of law, and better governance, the conditions for the Islamic State’s survival and rehabilitation will persist.

But there will also need to be a sensitivity to the unique place of Mosul in Iraq. Former resident Rasha al-Aqeedi says the city has a distemper all of its own. “God help any American or other foreigner who may come to have a hand in trying to govern Mosul after its liberation if they think that there is only one kind of resident in Mosul, one kind of Muslim, or one kind of anything else,” she writes. “The place is just not that simple, and missing the details is bound to end in tears for everyone.”<sup>60</sup> **CTC**

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